

# CONSECRATED

A vision of Religious life from the  
viewpoint of the sacred



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*A Vision of Religious Life from the Viewpoint of 'the Sacred'*

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## DEDICATION

To God  
who has been a merciful and generous Father

To Daddy and Mummy  
who loved me with such tenderness,  
and who I believe are with God

and

To all who are consecrated to God



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## ABBREVIATIONS

### Biblical Books

Gen - Genesis

Exod - Exodus

Lev - Leviticus

Num - Numbers

Deut - Deuteronomy

Sam - Samuel

Chron - Chronicles

Ps - Psalm

Wis - Wisdom

Isa - Isaiah

Jer - Jeremiah

Ezek - Ezekiel

Hos - Hosea

Hab - Habakkuk

Matt - Matthew

Rom - Romans

Cor - Corinthians

Gal - Galatians

Phil - Philipians

Heb - Hebrews

### Vatican II Documents

AG - *Ad Gentes*

(Decree on the Mission

Activity of the Church)

LG - *Lumen Gentium*

(Dogmatic Constitution on  
the Church)

PC - *Perfectae Caritatis*

(Decree on the Adaptation  
and Renewal of Religious  
Life)

### Others

A.D. - After the Death of  
Christ

Art. - Article

Ed. - Editor

Cf. - Confer

NT - New Testament

OT - Old Testament

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I find no satisfactory words to articulate an unstinting gratitude to God for calling me to the religious life, and especially for his merciful love and faithfulness to me. Let me praise him with the very words he inspired in the Psalmist: "For great is his steadfast love toward ...[me], and the faithfulness of the Lord endures forever" (Ps 117:2).

Many people deserve my special appreciation, not so much because of their assistance toward the publication of this book, but because of their contributions to my life. As I celebrate these twenty-five years of religious life, I am truly indebted to them all for making my life a joyful one:

- My religious family, Daughters of Divine Love Congregation, especially each Daughter with whom I have lived in community, and my past and incumbent Superior Generals, for granting me opportunities for growth in knowledge and in the fear of the Lord.
- Each member of my biological family, for their unrelenting support and sincere appreciation of me as God's special gift to them.
- My Colleagues and brothers at the Spiritan



International School of Theology, among whom I live and whose friendship and approach to life provide an environment that nurture healthy academic and religious lives. Among them, special appreciation goes to Fr Bona Ikenna Ugwu who took pains to proof-read the original manuscript of this work and for offering very useful suggestions that improved its quality; to Fr Ernest Munachi Ezeogu for accepting to read the manuscript and to write the Nihil Obstat; and to Fr Anthony Ekwunife whose book *Consecration in Igbo Traditional Religion, though not used in this work*, improved my understanding of the language of consecration in my own cultural setting.

- My colleagues at Bigard Memorial Seminary Enugu and All Saints Seminary Ekpoma, with whom I share the love for our beloved Mother, the Church and whose future we work together to promote.
- All my friends, who have helped me in different ways and whose faithfulness, support and love are signs of God's unconditional love for me.

## PREFACE

Although the message of this book is addressed primarily to the Religious in the Church, it is published with the recognition that any attempt to clarify issues concerning religious life must be done not only in a setting reserved for the religious but also in a setting open to the entire people of God and to the society within which the religious live and work. It must be acknowledged that the identity of the religious needs to be both comprehensible to all and defensible by the religious themselves. Consecrated life must also be recognized as very relevant to our world today.

The subject matter of this book was presented as a seminar paper to the Religious of the Catholic Diocese of Iselle-uku of Nigeria, given in June 2010. The topic of the seminar was "The Word of God in the Life of a Religious." In preparing that seminar paper, I had a good opportunity to reflect deeply on the idea of human intermediation of divine revelation. Today, some scholars consider that the term consecration is no longer adequate to be used to explain issues concerning religious life. In the pages of the present study, I proffer arguments that help the religious, as well as the contemporary reader, to challenge and surmount the ideas that impede the use of this concept. In fact, the present book is entitled "Consecrated" because the underlining significance of the term helps me to reaffirm the



fundamental value of human agency in the history of salvation. The theme of Chapter Three *Consecration in the Economy of Salvation* was originally prepared as class lectures at Bigard Memorial Seminary, Enugu-Nigeria on "Biblical Models of Faith", but it is reworked here to suit the purposes of the present project. **While Chapters Two and Three offer an in-depth study of the meaning of consecration as a form of human intermediation, Chapter Four highlights the importance of the consecrated life as one of the surviving signs of the Sacred in our world today. Another important motivation for the choice of this theme is underscored in Chapter Five, which reflects and elaborates an affirmation of Vatican II that consecration is foundational to the understanding and living out of the evangelical counsels.**

I decided to publish these studies in order to commemorate the Silver Jubilee of my religious profession in the Catholic Church. What I have written here represent what I believe consecrated life is all about. These ideas satisfy my quest for meaning and for a self-concept before God and in the Church. I propose it to all who live the consecrated life. I recommend this book for formators and retreat preachers. I propose it, above all, to those religious who are still searching for understanding, meaning and ways to articulate their identity in the Church.

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## CHAPTER ONE

### INTRODUCTION The Problem of Identity

**R**eligious life is one of the greatest gifts of God to his Church, although certain confusions becloud its identity. The Church has attractive definitions of religious life, especially where it says that it is a consecration to God and a way of perfect charity (LG 44). *Lumen Gentium* presents the Religious as one of the three fundamental groups that make up the life and mission of the Church. However, it is not an intermediate state between the clerical and lay states; rather, religious life participates in both the hierarchical and lay states (LG 43). Vatican II says, moreover, that although religious life does not belong to the hierarchical structure of the Church, it is a special calling that belongs to the life and holiness of the Church (LG 44).

Some people think that there is some confusion in this ecclesial definition of the state of religious life in the Church. The documents say that the religious do not belong to the hierarchical state. Yet they do not say that there is a third or intermediate state of life in the Church. Rather, they are very specific in pointing out that religious life is a consecrated state that belongs to the life and holiness of the Church. This means that God calls to the religious life people from both the clerical and lay states. They are called to live the holiness of



the Church more intensely in their lives.

*Lumen Gentium* adds that as a state consecrated to God (LG 45), religious life is the means through which the Church presents Christ to believers and unbelievers alike (LG 46). More beautiful is the definition that describes the religious as those who respond to the call of God to follow Christ more closely through the practice of evangelical counsels and who, through a total lifelong gift of themselves, live more and more for Christ and for his body which is the Church (PC 1). Nothing could be more specific and clearer than these definitions.

The confusion we encounter in religious life is not so much in the definitions than in the living out of the life. In this section, this problem of identity is discussed in relation to my own experiences, in relation to the ignorance of the identity of the religious within the Church, and finally, in relation to the crisis which religious life suffers due to on-going secularization in the world.

### *1.1 My Experiences*

The larger part of the twenty-five years I have lived as a nun has been for me a struggle with the meaning of my life as a religious, and the specific place of the religious in the Church. I continued to hope that I was not just being deceived by what I heard people say that religious life is. Partly this work was inspired by the discovery that my struggle for meaning was not personal to me. Many consecrated people in the Church battle with the same desire to discover who they are and how

they are relevant to God and to his Church. The way that the Church describes religious life makes so much sense, yet it was difficult for me identifying my lived experiences with the Church's descriptions. In other words, the meaning of religious life, as defined by the Church, does not in any way reconcile with the lived experience of many religious in the world. My experience mirrored the problematic relationship in the Church between lived experience and theological interpretations. In other words, a theological definition communicates meaning when it expresses an experience that is shared by the community.

I would like to note that, in all probability, none of the Church's definition of religious life was responsible for the initial decision of many religious men and women in Nigeria to embrace religious life. Most of us had neither any idea of nor any access to the Church's documents before we came knocking at convent doors. Most of us did not have the opportunity to hear it read to us, and those who had the opportunity probably understood neither the meaning nor the implications. The major attraction to this life came mostly from the person's initial exposure to spiritual life either by parents or tutors/teachers. It also came from the special ways in which priests and religious present themselves, the spiritual aura they evoke and the special respect which people accord them.

The day I brought my application to the convent, I was given a form to fill. Apart from certain general questions on family background and initial education, the central question in the



form was "why do you want to become a Reverend Sister?" I still do not forget my response to that question and how I wrote it. I offered two reasons. I wrote that I wanted to serve God by helping the poor. My second reason was that I wanted to go to heaven. The sister who interviewed me gave a sweet smile when she read those lines, and after some words of encouragement, she gave me a hug of acceptance and a date to return to the convent. I was seventeen years old and full of zeal for the Lord and for heaven. After my return to the convent, it was not long before I discovered that almost all of us, new candidates received that year, gave the same answers to the question.

We grew up thinking that religious life provides the easiest access to God's heart and to heaven. We used to see priests and they appeared very attractive in their Soutanes. The religious women seemed even more attractive, especially in their simple but gorgeous Habits.<sup>1</sup> They reminded us of heaven and of transcendental realities. We used to see them as those who are ready-made for heaven. So we opted to join them so that we could spend the rest of our lives in this place where we hoped to gain a thirst of the joys of heaven on earth. Reality soon dawned on us because we had hardly spent three months of postulancy than we saw that within the convent walls much work still needs to be done for the journey that leads to God. "Why did we leave home after all" was the persisting question, since reality did not match expectation. My experiences made me aware of the fact that

<sup>1</sup>The Habit is the dress of religious men and women, while the Soutane is what the priest wears.

there are many married people who serve God better than the supposed religious. I realized that at least my mother seemed to me to be closer to God than most people I encountered within the walls of the convent. I cite my mother as representative of most parents and lay people who live heroic lives of witness to Christ within the family and social setting. Yet the lectures I received during those formative years emphasized the superior quality of the religious life and how it makes sense. It seemed to me that there were very little experiences on the ground, very little indeed to give sufficient corroboration to the definitions that were given. Conflicting experiences motivated different decisions in us. One might be discouraged from continuing on the basis of a terrible encounter, and before the mind was fully made up, a positively different encounter reverses the decision previously taken. The convent is a place where one is constrained to see reality with the eyes of a biblical sage. There, reality is not either good or bad. It is a place where one finds people who are good and bad, wise and foolish, just and unjust, pious and wicked, beautiful and ugly, tall and short, fat and thin. The list includes and exhausts all contradicting categorizations.

The convent is a factory where saints are made. Like every factory, raw materials are sent there, materials that are crude, coarse, unprocessed, unrefined and untreated. Like every factory, it has many departments, each responsible for a production stage of the product. Saints are not made in heaven; they are made here on earth, but they are acknowledged and glorified in heaven. It would be an illusion



to hope to find only saints there. Like every factory, the convent houses people who represent factory appliances and devices for the mauling, processing and refinement of those who would become saints. Some are gradually becoming saints; others are there to prepare them for sainthood. One must fit into one of the categories. This is why the convent harbors humanity in its strength, purity, nakedness, goodness, ugliness and wickedness. What we could not fathom was what makes this factory unique. When does the material become a finished product? The truth is that the entire production stage does not all take place in the formation houses. It lasts as long as the life span of the person in question.

The novice is frightened, disoriented and discouraged at the initial encounter with the orchestration of human negative realities in customary holy places. Within the convent walls, the novice expects God revealed in loving, kind, forgiving, generous, and compassionate persons. One expects to find people who are capable of conversion and of reciprocal support. At least, the number of such people should enjoy absolute majority in the opinion poll. For us then, anything less of these expectations was dysfunctional. As we struggled to make sense of the disconnection between ideas and lived reality, we seemed like those who were being led through specious paths but we continued to journey like Abraham as he went his way to sacrifice Isaac. After many years of experience, I have been drawn into the wonderful discovery that meaning is possible even in this kind of dysfunctional situation, and this can be found in the strengthening power of a personal vocation within the community context. One must

not stay because others are staying. One must know why he/she is staying. One must have a well-defined goal.

There was the story of a young girl who felt on top of the world the day she was received into the convent. As part of her training, she was posted to two different communities for live-in experience, each for three months. After living with the sisters for five months, she felt she should rather go home than continue. She told the Superior General that she did not see what she was looking for within the convent walls: a peaceful community of loving persons. The superior had asked her a question that both changed and determined her life ever after. Young girl, she said; I am sorry for the bad experiences you have had but everything depends on why you came in the first place. "Have you come to receive love or to give it?" After a long decisive talk with the superior, she walked back to the convent with the same joy she felt when she was coming to the convent for the first time. This was in fact the day she got her vocation. The first year was preparatory to the enlightenment that gave her an important orientation in the vocation to follow Jesus Christ more closely. Religious life proves to be a very difficult way of life and it could even become unlivable when one works with a program of how things ought to be and how people ought to behave. To live a satisfactory life as a religious, one should swim against the prevailing current by charting a course of life that militates against any form of selfishness. The reality that is painted here is not just a convent reality. It is the human reality. Most successful families are so because of the sacrifice of the life of one or two who perseveringly do not



stop giving in order that some others might live. Every convent is a family.

Within the Church and in the world, religious life suffers a crisis of identity. This crisis is blamed on two major causes, which are (1) widespread ignorance of people about who the religious are and (2) the persisting challenge of secularization.

### ***1.2 Ignorance of the Identity of the Religious Within the Church***

Religious life suffers a crisis of identity because of a widespread ignorance of the identity and place of the religious in the Church. This ignorance hinders the required catechesis on it. It is sad to note that many Catholics know very little about religious life. The much people know about them regards their outstanding outfits and the kind of apostolates they do. Some religious who teach in schools or work in parishes do not even use the opportunities offered by their places of work to hold catechetical sections on the topic of religious life, reasons being either because it does not occur to them or they do not know how to go about it. In the seminary curriculum, there is no formal education on religious life. A very minimal attention, if not nothing, is given to the study of the theology of religious life or to the section of Canon Law that concerns religious life. Consequently, many young priests know very little about religious life, and these are those who ultimately become teachers in formation houses, spiritual directors and retreat moderators of the religious. It is surprising the rate at which this ignorance is very extensive.

During the Mass at my first religious profession in 1985, the homilist said that amongst its usefulness to the Church and to the society, religious life is one of the most effective means of population control. I do not remember any other thing he said that day; he might of course have said some other beautiful things, but this is the one I have not forgotten because the thought of it disturbed me greatly. Nothing would have led me to subscribe to a life with that kind of very cheap designation. In my eyes, it belittled everything we did that day and weakened my spirit. I thank God that the emotional torment it gave me was strong enough to set me on this journey towards meaning. After many years of deep reflection on the matter, it dawned on me that if consecrated people were making a well-defined presentation of their identity, no homilist would expend so many words in the effort to explain who they are because it would have then been obvious to everybody. Unfortunately, many religious people cannot offer an informed presentation of their self-concept. Religious life is one of those states of life that arouse questions concerning identity and this is blamed on the confusion about its identity. In every session of religious people, a good part of the number may experience great difficulty explaining the essence of religious life. I got the surprise of my life three years ago when I addressed a session of religious people during a seminar on "The Prospects of Living Religious Life Today". Many of the religious at the seminar had the lay person's knowledge of the religious as those who do not marry and who live according to the three vows of obedience, poverty and chastity. They understand themselves as those who live a distinctive life in the Church, but there is a substantial ignorance of what that



distinctiveness entails.

Many of us have been confronted by people who ask us to explain how exactly they could identify our specific distinctiveness. The uniqueness of the role of many other professions is clear to everybody. Nobody asks priests, professional teachers, medical doctors, lawyers, architects, accountants or bankers who they are and what they do. People approach them when they need their specific services. Nobody confuses a doctor with a lawyer. Nobody would approach an accountant for health related problems. This is so because people of different professions have been able to defend a credible image of who they are and what they do. From the way things are, I cannot say the same for the religious. It is interesting to note that amidst the religious frenzy of today's Nigeria, people in different works of life are becoming pastors, healers and prayer ministers. Groups of people and families who need particular spiritual and religious assistance do not come to the religious. They seek the assistance of people who publicly declare themselves as capable of rendering such services, and these are people in different works of life who are also pastors and prayer ministers.

In this regard, I want to make special reference to women who make public profession in the Church as religious. They are also consulted by many people for services other than what is specifically religious. When people organize weddings and other social activities, religious sisters are often invited to render special services, not as spiritual

advisers but as caterers and inner home decorators. It must be admitted that there is a growing number of religious women in the Nigerian Church who function as teachers in religious studies and theology, clinical psychologists, counselors and retreat preachers, functions previously and customarily reserved almost exclusively to priests. While praise should be given to religious congregation who make sustained efforts to train their members in these fields, it must be acknowledged that the number of professionally trained personnel in these fields is very minimal compared to the measure of work that must be done. Although this does not contribute to giving religious life the required identity, it is only showing where the emphasis is being placed: on ministry.

Since after Vatican II, and in spite of the change of perspectives expressed in its documents with regard to priesthood and religious life, priesthood is still being described chiefly and with so much emphasis on ministry. The essence of what makes the priest is still not highlighted in lived life and in relationships. Holiness of life is the basis of priesthood, a virtue with which the priest approaches the sanctuary to offer sacrifice and which makes him true mediator of the covenant (Heb 8; 10:5). Similarly, the emphasis on ministry has not changed so much in the understanding of religious life. Sometimes, the religious are invited to work in a place chiefly for cheap labor and not specifically because the Church in a particular place needs to experience the particular charism to which that institute bears witness. Due to undue emphasis on labor and output,



some religious groups expend no effort in seeing that, according to their particular charism, they are a prophetic witness or theological response to the needs of the particular Church in which they are. If the presence of an institute in a particular Church serves only as a means of increasing the labor force, their relevance will be questioned as soon as that Church grows, and soon after that they would be treated either as spare parts or as baby sitters who loose their place in the family because the babies for which they were employed have grown to become self sufficient. Vatican II advises all institutes of the active life that before they take up any apostolate, they should among other things ask themselves "whether their type of life is a witness to the Gospel accommodated to the character and condition of the people" (AG 40).

This teaching of Vatican II implies that religious life is defined from the perspective of its purpose in being and not principally from the viewpoint of the services that any religious group renders. Religious people are into many different professions. They are teachers, lawyers, doctors, nurses, laboratory technicians, cooks, accountants, bankers, architects, business people, pastoral - social workers, and secretaries and administrators of different establishments. In the society, these works are not reserved to the religious. About four decades ago, shortly after the Nigerian-Biafran civil war, the Nigerian Church experienced the State-take-over of schools, hospitals and other institutions which were means of the Church's evangelization ministry. This event was read as very negative and detrimental to the quality of

education and to the moral life of the Nigerian society. The Church's efforts to preach the Gospel through these means were not totally frustrated by this unfortunate decision of the State because more schools and hospitals were built and run without the financial and infrastructural support of the State. Today, one could consider these past events as fortunate and providential in some respects. After the State Government took over schools, the quality of education changed but it did not totally crumble. Today, one may find it difficult discovering a difference between schools, offices, hospitals and institutions run by the religious and the ones run by the State or other non-religious organizations. Some State institutions and/or privately owned ones are run better and more effectively than Church institutions.

The fact that education and healthcare are no longer a predominant preserve of the Church and that in the labor market, many people are faring better than the religious oblige the religious themselves to redefine their self-concept and their relevance to the society at large. Unfortunately, many religious people most often use their professions to establish their identity. Neither the Bible nor the Church documents define the religious from the perspective of what they do. It is always in relation to who they are. The work of the religious is described with the adjective "apostolate". It is therefore an expression of their devotion to the Church, whereby they are required to implant and strengthen the kingdom of Christ in souls and to extend that kingdom to every clime (LG 44). What they are should give character to what they do. This is the point from where the crisis sets in.



Therefore, the question is legitimately posed: what is the role of the religious? What use are they to human society and the contemporary world?

### 1.3 The Challenges of Secularization

Religious life also suffers a crisis of identity because of the all-pervasive and ongoing secularization of the world. Secularization is the opposite of spiritualization. It beckons on human beings to substitute the religious signs with secular ones. In itself, secularization is not a totally negative phenomenon. It has demonstrated this through its emphasis on the freedom and sanctity of the human person and its openness to values that guide societal relations. Here, secularization is discussed in relation to the Church and its negative impact on the living out of religious life in the contemporary world.

Secularization owes its origin to the atheistic, skeptical and individualistic philosophies of the nineteenth century philosophers, prepared by Freud, Marx and Nietzsche. It is rooted in a pragmatic manner of thinking which is hostile to metaphysics. These philosophies gave rise to different kinds of social systems (for instance, capitalist and socialist), where the human being is understood and treated as a purely organic-biological and social being; where production and exchange are the basis of human worth and of social organization; where the principle of ethics is the desire for happiness and the human being is the object or instrument for realizing this goal. They also gave rise to a movement towards autonomy (of reason and of behavior), to the rejection of the Church and its claim to the authority to interpret correct ethical behavior and

to a highly intensified demand for freedom.<sup>2</sup> In our age, science, social structures and morality have been made to virtually lose all need for the public support of religion, and they have developed into fully immanent forms of humanism.<sup>3</sup> Secularization is the rational explanation of the world, using principles drawn from science and from the world.

Secularization is expressed by signs which are of a different kind. In place of signs which announce the sacred, secularization operates with signs that foster societal and human relations, such as, honesty and respect, but also courage to accept the world as relative and not as absolute, and the strength not to absolutize the goods of this world with ideological statements.<sup>4</sup> It has an orientation different from societies run from a religious perspective where people express faith through persons, events, objects and actions which are considered as sacred and which they give a sacral character. Therefore, secularization is the historical process by which human beings, without rejecting God, free themselves from a religious interpretation of themselves or of the society. When we say that an environment is secularized, it means that the environment no longer operates from the viewpoint of theological ideologies. It does not give in to the controlling and determining power of God as the Holy One in our midst. What is secularized is what has been made purely worldly, purely material and completely drained of the divine

<sup>2</sup>Cf. Michael Schmaus, *Dogma 1: God in Revelation*, London: Sheed and Ward, 1987, p72-91.

<sup>3</sup>Louis Dupré, "Spiritual Life in a Secular Age" in George P. Schnier (ed.), *Ignatian Spirituality in a Secular Age*, Ontario: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, p16.

<sup>4</sup>Leonardo Boff, *God's Witness in the Heart of the World*, Chicago: Claret Centre for Resources in Spirituality, 1981, p158.



Spirit that used to determine the life and meaning of earthly realities. Secularization means that human beings no longer give God the power to determine the meaning or trend of history, but the human being has arrogated that power to itself.

When the book of Genesis says that God created man from dust and breathed on him the breath of life and the man became a living being, it means that the human being is a living being only because of the breath or spirit of God in him. The Spirit of God gives the person meaning and orientation. Without the indwelling Spirit of God, life is without meaning and without orientation. In the same way, the same account of creation affirms that the will of God determined the life and meaning of every created reality. On the basis of this divine will, determining and controlling all realities, history has meaning and orientation in the overall purpose of God. The indwelling Spirit of God or the will of God working out through created realities assures the holiness or spiritual character of the environment. Human history suffers secularization when it gives secular meaning to previously conceived spiritual realities. In this way, things lose their worth as sacramental signs of God's presence, that is, the ways through which God manifests or ensures his presence in it.

In our world today, certain theologies and customs have developed on the basis of these philosophical ideologies. In the area of religion, secularization did not take the form of a radical rejection of God but a critical reformulation of the means of communication with God. Within the Church, it has led, among other things, to the rejection of Church authority

and an opening to the radical secularity of the present age. The signs by which God's presence are assured stand in danger of being pushed into the background or they are in danger of disappearing; as a result the significance of cult is being undermined and the worship of God seems to exhaust its meaning in relationships between persons.

Since the Jewish and Christian religions affirm that the meaning and orientation of history depends only on the supreme will of God, it implies that secularization is a big threat to human history and to the practice of faith in it. The impact of secularization has been heightened with progress in the fields of science and technology. The contemporary world experiences secularization as desacralization or demythologization, which is the rejection of older religious symbols and the creation of new myths and new symbols, which are money, power and sex. This secular world thrives on and is nurtured by purely selfish and utilitarian myths created by big business, politics and the entertainment world. Within this world, religious life is also being challenged to change the sacral ways in which it had expressed itself and to adopt secular means of expression. These challenges are presented according to the following views:

- The entire creation and all of life is holy. Vows cannot make sacred what is already sacred. Therefore, no one needs to be set apart in order to fulfill the universal call to holiness.
- Dualistic distinctions, like that of sacred and profane, encourage a sense of superiority and the establishment of boundaries, and they discourage solidarity, mutuality and complementarity which should characterize the witness of



Christian vocation.

- No finite human being can bear witness to the holiness of God or the breakthrough of God in creation.
- The religious habit has become a counter sign because only secular signs can speak to the secular world.
- Honorific titles and established authority are not worth anything. What matters is professional, technical and scientific competence.
- To be a sign of divinely promised eschatological realities means that religious must live it in a secular way and not according to structures and forms which were valid in the past but not understandable in the present.

In the face of propositions such as the foregoing, religious life is challenged to give a response. The first response is to take serious Vatican II's affirmation that consecration is the very foundation of religious life. Some authors recommend other ways in which religious life could respond to the challenges posed by secularization. Leonardo Boff proposes a kind of symbiosis or "interpenetration of religious life and secularization so that each may clarify for the other what it is and what it is called to be, so that secularization does not fall into secularism and religious life into flight or isolation from the world."<sup>5</sup>

My proposal is that each religious institute should think out how best it could live its consecration as mission within the secular world. Previously, people have placed the primary emphasis on who the religious are to the world. Today, what is

<sup>5</sup>Boff, *God's Witnesses*, p172.

required is an inward assessment of who the religious are in relation to who God is and how they live. This should be the point of departure for mission. Since one of the primary contributions of Vatican II is its redefinition and emphasis on religious life as a life of consecration, I have chosen the title "Consecrated" in order to define who the religious are in relation to God and in relation to how they should live in the Church and in the society.



## CHAPTER TWO

### CONSECRATED TO GOD

In its treatment of Religious Life, *Lumen Gentium* says that “the evangelical counsels of chastity dedicated to God, poverty and obedience are based upon the words and examples of the Lord. They were further commanded by the apostles and Fathers of the Church, as well as by the doctors and pastors of souls” (LG 43). Not different from other parts of *Lumen Gentium*, this long sentence is given without any supporting quotation from the Bible. Five years ago, I had a discussion with some scholars who proffered very credible reasons to the argument that there is no biblical foundation to religious life. What they meant was that there is no biblical narration about a figure or persons, who lived religious life as it is lived in the Church today, that is, life in community and according to the three vows of obedience, poverty and chastity. Lack of proofs for biblical background also implies the absence of any explicit statement of the Lord on consecrated life, as is the case with marriage and divorce (cf. Mark 10:1-12; Matt 19:3-9). They consider as unnecessary any attempt to look for any witness in the Old Testament, considering the Old Testament's emphasis on marriage and the command to “increase and multiply”. What we find are references to related topics like choosing to be a eunuch for the sake of the Kingdom of Heaven (Matt 19:12) and the Pauline encouragement to the early Christians to



prefer the unmarried state (1 Cor 7:8-9, 25-40), which do not qualify for a basis to the evangelical counsels.

A closer study of these New Testament witnesses shows that they represent teachings that were given in relation to other issues. In Mark and Matthew, the statement about eunuchs was not a teaching given for its own sake. It is Jesus' response to the disciples' question on the perplexing nature of marriage and divorce. Seeing that marriage was divinely designed to be a life-long contract, and that divorce is against God's will except for reasons of unchastity, the disciples of Jesus expressed their fears about the possibility of marrying without sinning against God. For them, it was better not to marry. Jesus responded to their apprehension by saying that besides marriage, there is another state of life: the eunuch, who is either made so by nature or by another or chosen freely for the sake of the Kingdom of Heaven. Secondly, the Pauline preference for the unmarried state depends exclusively on what he calls "the impending crisis" (1 Cor 7:26). Paul clarifies that he was not speaking on the basis of any divinely given command (1 Cor 7:12, 25) but his own reflection on how he thought Christians should live in view of the Parousia which was expected soon (1 Cor 7:29). In view of the impending Parousia, therefore, Paul recommended marriage only to those who could not control their passion. Others should begin to live solely for the Lord in holiness and rid themselves of the anxiety associated with the married state, that is, worrying about how to please the husband or how to please the wife. I understood the argument of my colleagues. These New Testament witnesses may not qualify as the

foundation of religious life, which is defined as a close and radical following of Jesus. Nevertheless, the fact remains that religious life is not the only biblical theme that was not defined for its own sake. Many other themes, like the prayer 'Our Father' was given in a similar circumstantial context, yet it is taken as a foundational pattern of prayer for Christians.

It has also been argued that religious life is a historical development in the Church, whose beginning is traceable to the post-apostolic church, especially to those early Christians who dedicated themselves to a gospel-oriented life-style, to a radical following of Jesus Christ. The first person to do this was Anthony of Egypt (4<sup>th</sup> century A.D.). He was followed by a line of disciples until what began as single, isolated cases grew into an institution in the Church. The early religious did not profess particular vows but they lived a life according to the gospel or to specific aspects of the gospel, such as poverty, service to the sick or to the poor.

The foregoing arguments, notwithstanding, the present author argues that if Anthony of Egypt's radical decision was inspired by Christ's words, then religious life has a biblical foundation. The biblical quotations offered in support of the definition of Religious Life in *Perfectae Caritatis* (Vatican II: Decree on the Adaptation and Renewal of Religious Life) support the idea that it is life lived in imitation of the life of Jesus Christ. So the biblical background for religious life is Jesus Christ. In his article "Understanding a Theology of Religious Life", D.L. Fleming underlines the benefits of



describing the notion of consecration as evangelical.<sup>6</sup> Although there are no explicit statements from the Lord which present the three vows as categories of discipleship, evangelical consecration implies two things. Firstly, it implies that the religious vows of chastity, poverty and obedience are "so central to Jesus' life and message that they become a natural focus for intensifying a life dedicated to following Jesus as seen in the Gospels". Secondly, since religious consecration is founded on the baptismal consecration, evangelical consecration also implies that religious life is a heightened and intensified form of Christian discipleship.<sup>7</sup>

To this witness of the life of Jesus, one could add Old Testament ideas that prepared the way to the Church's statement that consecration is the foundation of religious life. It is, therefore, possible to find in the biblical tradition a sure foundation for consecrated life in the Church. In the previous chapter, we noted the contribution of Vatican II to a new perspective in the understanding of religious life as a life of consecration. Fleming affirms that with this definition, Vatican II presents the religious as those who "consciously and professedly strive for holiness more closely in imitative of Jesus and his values."<sup>8</sup>

Since more than forty years after Vatican II, some works on

<sup>6</sup>D.L. Fleming, "Understanding a Theology of Religious Life" in G.A. Arbuckle D.L. Fleming (eds.), *Religious Life. Rebirth Through Conversion*, New York: Alba House, 1990, p22.

<sup>7</sup>Fleming, "Theology of Religious Life", p24-25.

<sup>8</sup>Fleming, "Theology of Religious Life", p22.

religious life have been written as a deepening of this new focus on religious life. The present work recognizes the great importance of using the concept of 'consecration' as central to a definition of religious life and, different from the approach of most recent authors, it makes its discussion revolve exclusively around this foundational concept. In doing this, it intends to achieve the following results. Firstly, since the idea of consecration implies that only God consecrates, this new focus discourages any definition of religious life as the result of merely historical events. Rather, it places religious life exactly within the place where it belongs, that is, in the initiative and call of God. Secondly, consecration is founded on the event of Christ. Therefore, it underscores, more than any other concept, an understanding of religious life that fits into a pattern of election in the economy of salvation. It presents the religious as particular sharers in the divine nature. Having been called to be more intensively conformed to the image of Christ, they are particular intermediaries in the economy of salvation. Thirdly, it discourages opinions that place the background of religious life outside of the biblical tradition. Therefore, it argues that if the idea of the 'holy' underlies religious life, then we are within the biblical tradition.

In the following paragraphs, this section of the work studies the term 'consecration' in the Bible, and on the basis of the nature of the evidences, it will further discuss some biblical images of consecration, as well as draw out its different levels of meaning and its goals.



## 2.1 The Term 'Consecration'

The term consecration derives from the word 'holy' or 'holiness', which translates the Hebrew word *qadosh* and the Greek word *hagios*. The Hebrew verb *qadash* and its Greek equivalent *hagiazō* are translated as 'to consecrate', 'to make holy' or 'to sanctify'. Its correlate is *tahar* which means 'to purify' together with the noun *tohar* which means 'purity'.<sup>9</sup> Reading through the passages in which it occurs, *qadash* appears to be used in connection with other roughly synonymous words like *badil* (to divide) and *nazar* (to separate, to consecrate Lev 15:31; Ezek 14:7). The verbs *qadash* and *nazar* are used in the following texts:

**Numbers 6:5-7,12** All the days of their nazirite vow no razor shall come upon the head; until the time is completed for which they separate themselves to the LORD, they shall be holy; they shall let the locks of the head grow long. All the days that they separate themselves to the LORD they shall not go near a corpse. Even if their father or mother, brother or sister, should die, they may not defile themselves; because their consecration to God is upon the head... and [they] separate themselves to the LORD for their days as nazirites, and bring a male lamb a year old as a guilt offering. The former time shall be void, because the consecrated head was defiled.

In these texts, the terminology describes the state of a person

<sup>9</sup>Cf. "Holiness" in A.C. Myers (ed.), *The Eerdmans Bible Dictionary*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987, p493; "Sanctify, Consecrate" in *The Eerdmans Bible Dictionary*, p911.

who makes a vow to the Lord. The nature and purpose of this vow is not stated, but the person in vow is called a Nazirite and the state in which the person lives this vow is holy. This means that primarily, consecration or holiness is the consequence of an act of separation. A certain way of life is expected of the Nazirite. The Nazirite period is temporary,<sup>10</sup> and during this time, the person should be distinguishingly recognizable to all in wearing long locks of hair, and expected to observe, in an extreme manner, the legal requirements of purity in Israel. Also used in close connection with *qadosh* is the verb *mille'* (to anoint), which features especially in the context of the ordination of a priest.

**Leviticus 16:32** The priest who is anointed and consecrated as priest in his father's place shall make atonement, wearing the linen vestments, the holy vestments.

In cultic usage, it is a separation from mundane existence and for the service and worship of God.

**Exodus 29:31-33** You shall take the ram of ordination, and boil its flesh in a holy place; and Aaron and his sons shall eat the flesh of the ram and the bread that is in the basket, at the entrance of the tent of meeting. They themselves shall eat the food by which atonement is made, to ordain and

<sup>10</sup>The period is called "days of their Nazirite vow" (Num 6:5. Cf. Vv6,8,13).



consecrate them, but no one else shall eat of them, because they are holy.

The states of the Nazirite and of the priest are both described as a state of separation and consecration. Other important synonyms of the term are *hanak* (dedicate) and *'abar* (devote), denoting things separated, anointed and devoted or set apart to God, particularly as an offering (Lev 27:28). The word *herem* denotes absolute and total dedication.

The foregoing study reveals that the word applies to persons, who bind themselves God or to God's service. It also applies to things devoted to God within the cultic context. It is important to note, at this juncture, that the idea of consecration is not universally accepted as a laudable concept to be used to describe the life of a particular group in the Church. Before any further elaboration is made on its use in this work, it would be necessary to discuss the reasons why some people hesitate to adopt it as adequate.

## 2.2 The Problem of the Language of 'Consecration'

The use of the language of consecration in contemporary definitions of religious life is rejected for the following reasons:

a. Before its presentation of Religious Life, *Lumen Gentium* (art. 39) gives a vision of the universal call to holiness of the entire members of the Church. This is because Christ gave his life for the Church, uniting her to his own body in order to sanctify her (Eph 1:4; 5:25-26; 1 Thess 4:3). Religious life is presented as one of the ways in which this universal call to

holiness is expressed. This definition stands in line with the biblical tradition. The Old Testament summarizes God's Law to his people in one sentence "Be holy for I the Lord your God am holy" (Lev 19:2). Jesus also preached holiness to all his followers and presented it as the model of discipleship when he says "Be you perfect, even as your heavenly Father is perfect" (Matt 5:48). Presented in this way, the call to holiness appears to be universal and not specifically directed to the religious.

b. The word 'consecration' implies a separation or a setting apart for sacred use which suggests the idea of being made superior or being placed in a more favored position above others. More recent books avoid the term and prefer to define religious life from a holistic point of view, placing their emphasis on solidarity, option for the poor, mutuality and complementarity. It would be necessary to cite some interesting statements of authors who adopt this approach.

According to Sandra Schneiders,  
...consecration in the community of the New Testament involves neither separation nor superiority... We have been sent into the world as Jesus was sent into the world to bring salvation by solidarity with, not by separation from, those to whom we are sent.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>11</sup>Cf. "Holiness" in A.C. Myers (ed.), *The Eerdmans Bible Dictionary*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987, p493; "Sanctify, Consecrate" in *The Eerdmans Bible Dictionary*, p911.



Another author who shares this holistic approach to religious life is Barabara Fiand. In her book *Refocusing the Vision*, she says:

I believe that a holistic paradigm can no longer accept a view of consecration that implies "having been set apart," nor a lifestyle that encourages this concept. Because Jesus came to proclaim the holiness of all creation, the holiness, therefore, of every human being, because in this way he affirmed the universal mandate to give glory to God simply by being *who we are*, no one needs to be set apart... Taking vows, therefore, can longer be interpreted in terms of making more sacred what already is sacred. It simply cannot mean anything different from what Jesus declared all of creation to be. All of life is holy, and it might be easier for us if we were to understand different vocations as complementary calls to contextualize and bear witness to this holiness, rather than to interpret them "above or below each other" on the hierarchical ladder.<sup>12</sup>

The views of these two authors, represented above, manifest a level of faithfulness to the teachings of Vatican II and to the biblical idea of consecration. They are right in saying that

<sup>12</sup>The period is called "days of their Nazirite vow" (Num 6:5. Cf. Vv6,8,13).

consecration is not the special reserve of a particular class of people in the Church. There is a universal call to holiness which the people of God manifest through various expressions and according to their different states of life. One finds in the views of these authors the idea that knowledge of God should not be attached to sacramental signs but must move on to the level of the personal. Our study of the term 'consecration' also reveals that it does not imply any idea of superiority but that of closeness to God and for service. The question, therefore, is whether the biblical call to universal holiness necessitates a rejection of the special call to holiness to which the religious should bear witness. Attention should be paid to the comprehensive biblical and ecclesial (Vatican II) teaching on consecration. After describing the universal call to holiness of all the faithful (LG 39), Vatican II applies this specifically to the religious in the Church when it says

Thus, the state which is constituted by the profession of the evangelical counsels, though it does not belong to the hierarchical structure of the Church, nevertheless, undeniably belongs to its life and holiness (LG 44).

Again it says:

The holiness of the Church is fostered in a special way by the observance of the counsels proposed in the Gospel by our Lord to his disciples. An eminent position among these is held by virginity or the celibate state (cf. 1 Cor



7:32-34). This is a precious gift of divine grace given by the Father to certain souls (cf. Mt 19:11; 1 Cor 7:7), whereby they may devote themselves to God alone the more easily, due to an undivided heart. This perfect continency, out of desire for the kingdom of heaven, has always been held in particular honor in the Church. The reason for this was and is that perfect continency for the love of God is an incentive to charity, and is certainly a particular source of spiritual fecundity in the world (LG 42).

Similarly,

Members of each institute should recall first of all that by professing the evangelical counsels they responded to a divine call so that by being not only dead to sin (cf. Rm 6:11) but also renouncing the world they may live for God alone. They have dedicated their entire lives to his service. This constitutes a special consecration, which is deeply rooted in that of Baptism and expresses it more fully (PC 5).

The above statements express in a clearer way the special role to which the religious are invited to fulfill in the Church. Any attempt to relativize this role in the name of apparently dignified goals, like mutuality and complementarity, is a misrepresentation of the Church's definition of the self-understanding of the religious in the Church. Although

affirming and emphasizing the universal call to holiness, which has a biblical foundation, Vatican II does not hesitate to show that a group of persons in the Church are specially called to a special consecration, which expresses the baptismal consecration more fully. The affirmation of Vatican II can be interpreted to mean that the religious, through their special consecration, are sacramental signs of the holiness of the entire Church, as well as signs of those transcendental realities promised us by God. They have the special call to live this holiness in its fuller expression. They are the centre from which the dynamism of holiness spreads out to the entire body of Christ.

The ideas of Schneiders and Fiand are representative of a present trend in the contemporary world to reject any form of separation that encourages superiority, exclusivism, elitism, the sense of being above others, and in fact, patriarchy and hierarchy, which they say did not exist either in the ideas of Jesus or in the New Testament Church. According to Schneiders, "adequate witness to the mystery of divine love can only be given in mutuality and complementarity."<sup>13</sup> Fiand corroborates this view when she says

Because of our inherent finitude, none of us can fully contain and give witness to the breakthrough of God in creation. Each one of us as we live our calling with authenticity is,

<sup>13</sup>Schneiders, "Evangelical Equality", p63.



therefore, a partial but valid expression of the multidimensional manifestation of God's self-revelation in Christ.<sup>14</sup>

There is an aspect of the biblical teaching that is being obscured here. Holiness encompasses all other divine attributes and in fact the non-human ways in which God exhibits those attributes. Therefore, no human being can bear a comprehensive witness to the all-encompassing holiness of God; nevertheless, at different times in the history of salvation God reveals aspects of himself through particular events and particular individuals. In its biblical context, consecration does not necessarily have the meaning of superiority and it does not encourage elitism and exclusivism. If consecration is lived out in the historical and cultural contexts with a feeling and exhibition of superiority, it is an aberration of the original meaning of the idea. We must direct our efforts to addressing the abuse and not the concept. When defined from the perspective of the idea of consecration, religious life is shown to represent the manner in which the Holy Spirit invites each religious congregation to live out its charism in the Church as an aspect of God's holiness.

### 2.3 Reformulating the Argument

Since there is a hesitation in using the word 'consecration' to define religious life, the argument for its use could be reformulated. What is at stake is whether the use of the

<sup>14</sup>Fiand, *Refocusing the Vision*, p59.

language of consecration is meaningfully understood by those who use it. In other words, outside the cultic sphere, does the term 'consecration' have a recognizable reference to lived experience in the world?

The meaning of consecration as 'being set apart for special use' is not far removed from human experience. In many ways, our daily lives include experiences of setting apart. We are continually presented with things and persons to which or to whom we must be related differently because they either represent higher values or they define limits of relationship. My first reference is the utensils we use in the homes. For instance, the family sets apart certain pots and containers for drinking water, while the rest of the pots could be used for other foods. If a pot dedicated specially for boiling drinking water is used to cook food, that pot is 'desecrated'. The family would either buy a new pot for that use or would have to sanitize the desecrated one. Similarly, some families reserve certain plates for the service of special visitors. They may not serve visitor's food with plates which they use for everyday meals. Certain plates are also reserved for special occasions or special feast days. Another practical experience that can explain this concept is the football game, where the rule of the game allows only one person to touch the ball with the hands. The goal keeper is so to speak 'consecrated' to that function. How the game is played defines what is sacred and what is profane. Besides the goal keeper, any other player who touches the ball with the hands has defied the rule. Similarly, the designation "off site" is a profanation of sacred space which belongs only to the goal keeper at a particular time of



the game. Thirdly, an employee who has the benefit of a free day in the week considers this day as almost 'sacred' that is, to be used for rest and for running private errands. What makes that day special is that it is dedicated particularly to the employee and not to the affairs of his or her office.

These references above show that 'setting apart', 'defining boundaries' and 'dedicating certain things for special use' is part of our everyday experience. They show that the categories of 'Sacred' and 'Profane' are neither found in a relationship of superior and inferior nor in that of the exalted and the lowly. We should rather understand profane to refer to what belongs to the ordinary, everyday use. In another sense, what is set apart is designed for a specific role that is unique to a person, thing or event. For instance, in Rom 1:1 Paul says that he is "set apart" for the Gospel of God. This statement distinguishes the character of Paul's gospel from the kind of gospel that the other apostles preached. The same meaning is given for why Sunday is a holy day for Christians. It does not make the other six days pagan and unholy. Similarly, within liturgical contexts, the materials we call 'sacred linens' are made from simple white cloths which people do not even use for the making of special clothes. Ordinarily, there is nothing special about those linens, white cloths made from simple China material, sewn at their ends and marked with a red cross. These linens are called holy only because they are set apart to be used for divine cult. Whether they are dirty or torn, they are sacred linens. It is sacrilegious to use them outside this sphere. There is no question then that consecration is part of our experience. Consecration defines the temporal, special and functional

contexts within which persons, things and events are placed. What is set apart or consecrated is not superior to others. The consecration of the person or thing defines the person's or thing's limit of operation and use.

The vocabulary of consecration does not exhaust the wide range of meaning that the concept has in the Bible. The meaning applies to other areas in which the vocabulary is not used. For a complete presentation of the meaning of this concept in the Bible, it is necessary to expose these other areas of meaning which further elucidate the thought world from which the idea of consecration derives and within which it is used. Some biblical paradigms of consecration are presented here to show how the concept relates to other biblical ideas like divine revelation, the Godhuman relationship, and to God's plan of salvation.

#### **2.4 Biblical Paradigms of Consecration**

The word 'paradigm' is used here to denote how persons, things or events play models of consecration in action. There are many biblical paradigms of consecration. Of the many, only three are selected here for discussion. Each of these three shows how the idea of consecration is all-encompassing (of time, place, thing or person) and how God, in his plan of salvation, intends to claim all creation through closer relationship with its representative parts. The underlying concept here is: the nearer a person or a thing is to God the more powerful it is to draw its likes to God. Following the presentation of the biblical story, the first of these paradigms is the Sabbath.



### 2.4.1 *The Sabbath*

Sabbath refers to time and to how human involvement in and use of time creates history. The earliest reference to the Sabbath is found in the Pentateuch. In this context, it plays a prominent role in the creation account (Gen 1:12:4a) and in the legal institution of Israel (Exod 16:22-30). In the creation account, God finished his creative activity in six days and rested (*šābat*) on the seventh day, the Sabbath (Gen 2:2). The Sabbath is a day like any of the seven days of the week but it is also different from the other six days of the week because God blessed it in a way different from other days; he made it holy by separating it from all other days. The separation and sanctification of the seventh day indicates that the Sabbath belongs to God, and it symbolizes God's claim and lordship over time and history. By sanctifying the seventh day, God invited human beings to imitate God's rest by enjoying the divine gift of freedom from the labors of human existence and to acknowledge God as creator. The Sabbath became an important item in Israel's legal system (Exod 23:12; Deut 5:14) where it is a special sign of covenant faithfulness, said to be founded on creation (Exod 20:11) and on the redemptive event of the Exodus (Deut 5:14-15). Through the Sabbath, Israel commemorates God as creator and redeemer. The Sabbath, therefore, became a sign of a true relationship with God which has implications in Israel's cultic, social, economic and political life. The consecration of the Sabbath shows how imitation of God's action and use of time affected all the other aspects of Israel's life.

The meaning of Sabbath, as explained in the foregoing lines, resonates in the institution of the Sabbatical year (Lev 25:2-7), the seventh year in which the land is to be left fallow. Though founded on theological reasons, the dominant motivation of the sabbatical arrangements is humanitarian. It calls Israel to imitate God in his creative and redemptive acts by practical care for fellow human beings. In the New Testament, Jesus' controversial Sabbath healings were intended to restore the Sabbath to be a benefit for humankind, thereby underscoring its original meaning as God's healing and saving rulership over human beings.<sup>15</sup> According to C.J.H. Wright, the laws of the sabbatical year ensured an economic system whose immediate goal was to relieve the burdens of the slaves and to give maximum assistance to the poor. In this way, the Sabbath reflected not only the sovereignty of Yahweh, but also his moral demands.<sup>16</sup>

### 2.4.2 *The Temple and the Law*

In the history of Israel, there are two fundamental ways in which God assured his presence in the midst of his people. It is assured through the Temple which is the sacrament or visible sign of God, dwelling in the midst of his people. God's presence, through the Temple, secured the indestructibility of the nation, as well as peace and general wellbeing. Solomons' prayer of dedication of the Temple (1 Kings 8:22-

<sup>15</sup>Cf. Mark 2:27-28; 3:1-6; Matt 12:9-14; John 5:1-18; 9:1-41.

<sup>16</sup>C.J.H. Wright, *An Eye for Eye*, Downers Grove, 1983, chapter 3 and 4.



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61) and God's reply to that prayer (1 Kings 9:3-9) indicate that the abovementioned benefits accruing from God's presence through the Temple is dependent on another sacrament of God's presence, the Law. The conditional statement that God's presence is assured through a corresponding human behavior is well underscored in Jeremiah's critique of Israel's hope of safety in a divine promise that has degenerated into a mere ideology due to bad behavior:

**Jeremiah 7:3-10** Thus says the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel: Amend your ways and your doings, and let me dwell with you in this place. Do not trust in these deceptive words: "This is the temple of the LORD, the temple of the LORD, the temple of the LORD." For if you truly amend your ways and your doings, if you truly act justly one with another, if you do not oppress the alien, the orphan, and the widow, or shed innocent blood in this place, and if you do not go after other gods to your own hurt, then I will dwell with you in this place, in the land that I gave of old to your ancestors forever and ever. Here you are, trusting in deceptive words to no avail. Will you steal, murder, commit adultery, swear falsely, make offerings to Baal, and go after other gods that you have not known, and then come and stand before me in this house, which is called by my name, and say, "We are safe!"-- only to go on doing all these abominations?

The sacral nature of the place is, therefore, assured through a life according to the Law of the God of the land. Obedience to

the Law of God provides the avenue for securing the orthodox worship of God and human behavior that corresponds with the nature of God who dwells in the midst of his people. Therefore, the benefits of God's presence in the Temple are assured when he is worshiped in the land and when the people live according to his will as expressed in the Law. Permanence in the land, peace and wellbeing in the land are dependent on obedience to this Law. These ideas determine the concept of the people of God as a holy people, that is, the people whose God is so near to them and who transfuses in them his holiness. The sacramental benefits of these biblical images extend beyond Israel and acquire a missionary character in the sense that while the Temple and the Law are the sacrament of God's presence in Israel, the holy people of God are the sacrament of God's presence in the world. On the basis of these ideas, Isaiah proclaimed that Israel is God's servant to the nations: "I will give you as a light of the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth."<sup>17</sup> Similar to the Sabbath, the Temple, as a consecrated place, invited the people of Israel to a lived witness befitting of a people whose God dwelt in her midst. The Temple and the Law became the means through which God transfused his moral character into the people. In this regard, the adage "like father like son", "like God like people" could be applied here. With these ideas, I introduce the reader to the third biblical image of consecration.

<sup>17</sup>Isa 49:6; cf. Isa 42:6.



### 2.4.3 Israel

According to the biblical account, the history of Israel began with God's call of Abraham and God's promise to him to make him a great nation and to bless him with innumerable descendants (Gen 12:1-3). The descendants of Abraham, Israel, later experienced God's redemptive action in their liberation from Egyptian slavery, God's providential and fatherly care through their wilderness sojourn and God's gift of land to them. Israel interpreted these redemptive events as an act of separation by which they became God's own people. Israel's consecration as a people set apart for God is inaugurated during the covenant with God.

**Exodus 19:3-6** Then Moses went up to God; the LORD called to him from the mountain, saying, "Thus you shall say to the house of Jacob, and tell the Israelites: You have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself. Now therefore, if you obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession out of all the peoples. Indeed, the whole earth is mine, but you shall be for me a priestly kingdom and a holy nation. These are the words that you shall speak to the Israelites."

This text has expressions that denote the idea of consecration, expressions such as 'brought you to myself', 'my treasured possession out of all the peoples', and 'priestly kingdom and

holy nation'. These expressions show that Israel was chosen to belong to God in a way that other nations were not (cf. Deut 4:20). Such a choice of Israel does not imply superiority over other nations as Deut 7 affirms

**Deuteronomy 7:6-8** For you are a people holy to the LORD your God; the LORD your God has chosen you out of all the peoples on earth to be his people, his treasured possession. It was not because you were more numerous than any other people that the LORD set his heart on you and chose you-- for you were the fewest of all peoples. It was because the LORD loved you and kept the oath that he swore to your ancestors, that the LORD has brought you out with a mighty hand, and redeemed you from the house of slavery, from the hand of Pharaoh king of Egypt.

This consecration of the people took place during the covenant at Sinai (Exod 19:24). God communicated his holiness to them by dwelling in their midst (Deut 7:6; 26:19; Jer 2:3). Consecration was intended to be the permanent mark of God's people (Lev 19:2; 1 Pet 1:15) and it should be evidenced through a way of life according to the Law of God (Exod 31:13; Lev 19:5-8, 17-18; 20:8). By living this way of life, Israel bear witness to God before other people, in order to win them over to the only true and living God.



In addition to the consecration of the entire people of God, from among the people, specific persons were also chosen by God and accorded some degree of holiness; that is, they were consecrated for special services. These were the priests (Exod 30:30; 40:12-15), the Levites (Num 8:5-21), the firstborn sons (Exod 13:2) the Nazirites (Num 6:1-21), warriors involved in holy war (1 Sam 21:5-6; Isa 13:3) and the prophets (2 Kings 4:9; Jer 1:5). Two particular words underscore the cultic and missionary character of Israel's consecration. In Exod 19:6, God gives Israel the identity associated with their consecration. They are to be a priestly kingdom and a holy nation. The two terms 'priestly' and 'holy' are used here in synonymous relationship, meaning to underscore, firstly, their total belonging to God and to God's service; secondly, that through their lives they play a mediatorial role, like priests are meant to do, between God and the entire world; and thirdly, that holiness forms the essence of priesthood. Both terms also indicate that their service to God has a cultic character. Therefore, as the sign of God's holiness, Israel is the instrument of God's salvation of the world. The New Testament adopted with some modifications these Old Testament ideas of God's presence. In the New Testament, Jesus Christ and the people who believe in him are the signs of God's presence in the world.

The paradigms of consecration, described above, show the various ways through which time, events, places and persons have meaning that point beyond themselves, and that reality has both material and spiritual dimensions. The spiritual dimensions are the meanings that are given to things because

of God's action or pronouncement on and through them. On the basis of God's action, reality points beyond its natural significance towards the transcendent. We saw that the dominant motivation of the consecration of time, place, thing or person is to illicit human behavior and action that correspond to God's nature and action in the world. These presentations complete our study of the terminology, and they help us to articulate different levels of meaning of the idea of consecration.

## 2.5 The Meaning of Consecration

The study of the language of consecration shows that the idea of consecration relates primarily to God as the holy one and only secondarily to a person, thing, place or event because of their closeness or dedication to God. They are holy in so far as they serve as God's extraordinary channels of communication or revelation. The meaning of consecration is derived here from the implication of the terminology and the significance of the paradigms exposed above. In the light of these preceding studies, we would now try to highlight the concrete implications of the term. The first implication is that the idea of consecration relates primarily to God.

a. God is Holy: Consecration derives from the fundamental quality of God as Holy. God is addressed as the holy one, as we read from many biblical passages, for instance, Isa 1:4; 5:19; 6:1-5; Hos 11:9; Ps 99; Job 6:10. One of Israel's earliest hymns praises God as glorious in holiness: "Who is like you, O LORD, among the gods? Who is like you, majestic in holiness, awesome in splendor, doing wonders?" (Exod



15:11). Holiness designates God's transcendence and moral character, but also his separateness from the mundane and profane spheres. In a particular way, the concept of holiness designates the non-human manner in which God demonstrates that he is God and not human.<sup>18</sup> It describes God as God. Therefore, it encompasses all other divine attributes and is central to Israel understanding of the essence of God. In later usage, God came to be known as the wholly other in relation to everything creaturely. God's holiness is revealed in a preeminent way in his desire to save a sinful world, in his mercy and compassion to his stubborn and ungrateful people. God explains the power of his graceful actions in this description of himself:

**Hosea 11:7-9** M people are bent on turning away from me...How can I give you up, Ephraim? How can I hand you over, O Israel? How can I make you like Admah? How can I treat you like Zeboiim? My heart recoils within me; my compassion grows warm and tender. I will not execute my fierce anger; I will not again destroy Ephraim; for I am God and no mortal, the Holy One in your midst, and I will not come in wrath.

Hosea, in this text, depicts God as totally different from human beings especially in his desire to save human beings in spite of their continuous stubbornness. Similarly, Isaiah's characteristic name for God is "the Holy One of Israel", and

<sup>18</sup>Ps 50:21; Isa 55:8-9.

the prophet says this in the various passages that both foretell and describe God's mercy in calling Israel back from Babylonian exile.<sup>19</sup> During the time of the prophets, holiness virtually became synonymous with God's divinity (cf. Isa 6:3). Nevertheless, our God is a God in relationship. Through contact with his creation, God communicates and shares what he is with them. The next paragraph shows how creatures could also be called holy on the basis of the intensity of their relationship with God. In fact, God's relationship with his people is summed up in the command "You shall be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy."<sup>20</sup>

b. God makes Holy; God Consecrates: It is God who makes holy, sanctifies and consecrates. God consecrates persons, places, objects, days and seasons. Things, places and events are called holy because of their proximity to God. For instance, the Sabbath or Sunday is holy because it is the day of the Lord; the Temple or the Church is holy because it is the house of God; Jerusalem is called the holy city because it is the city of God; the angels, because of their proximity with God, are called the holy ones; the Holy Spirit is holy because she is the Spirit of God. Persons, things, places and events share in God's holiness because they either share in the life of God or they are dedicated exclusively to God. Christians are called holy people or saints<sup>21</sup> because they all belong to God as those redeemed through the blood of Jesus Christ.

<sup>19</sup>Cf. for instance Isa 12:6; 45:11; 47:4; 49:7.

<sup>20</sup>Lev 19:2; 1 Pet 1:15.

<sup>21</sup>Cf. Rom 1:7; 1 Cor 1:2.



However, this holiness is lived in different grades of intensity. The holiness of God is imparted on what and whom God consecrates. As the text cited below shows, what is consecrated has the power to impart God's holiness on what and whom it comes in contact.

**Exodus 29:35-37** Thus you shall do to Aaron and to his sons, just as I have commanded you; through seven days you shall ordain them. Also every day you shall offer a bull as a sin offering for atonement. Also you shall offer a sin offering for the altar, when you make atonement for it, and shall anoint it, to consecrate it. Seven days you shall make atonement for the altar, and consecrate it, and the altar shall be most holy; whatever touches the altar shall become holy.

**Exodus 30:29-30** You shall consecrate them, so that they may be most holy; whatever touches them will become holy. You shall anoint Aaron and his sons, and consecrate them, in order that they may serve me as priests.

Thus, all objects related to cultic service are holy: the temple and places where God appeared and where God is customarily worshipped,<sup>22</sup> the city of Jerusalem,<sup>23</sup> priestly vestments (Lev 16:4), temple and altar vessels, all offerings

<sup>22</sup>Gen 28:11-22; Exod 3:5; 1 Kings 8:10-11; Ps 28:2; 1 Chron 29:3; Isa 11:9; 56:7; 62:9; 64:10.

<sup>23</sup>Neh 11:1,18; Isa 48:2; 52:1.

and sacrifices (Lev 7:1), tithes (Deut 26:13), including the times set apart by God for worship: the Sabbath<sup>24</sup> and the Jubilee (Lev 25:12). The New Testament speaks of believers in Christ<sup>25</sup> as made holy or sanctified by God through the sacrifice of Christ and through the Holy Spirit.<sup>26</sup>

*The arguments of the two paragraphs below are not direct implications of consecration but they are related to the use of the language of consecration in the Bible.*

c. A related argument here is the milieu and means by which consecration takes place. The idea of holiness derives from the context of cult. Everything associated with the worship of God is holy. God confers this status on them through a ritual act. Consecration takes place through the agency of a minister and through some ceremonial ritual acts (Exod 30:43; 31:13). The ritual is performed through a sacrifice of atonement or sin offering and through anointing with oil. After it, the person or object is consecrated or holy. Nevertheless, it is the sacramental presence of God that imparts holiness, and the Israelites expressed this in their reverence for God's holy name, which constituted the actual presence of God with them.<sup>27</sup>

Vatican II affirms the relevance of liturgical or cultic setting and the great significance which sacrificial ritual gives to the

<sup>24</sup>Gen 2:3; Exod 20:8; Neh 9:14; Isa 58:13.

<sup>25</sup>John 17:19; 1 Cor 1:2,30; Eph 5:25-26.

<sup>26</sup>Rom 15:16; 1 Pet 1:2.

<sup>27</sup>Cf. Lev 20:3; 22:2; 1 Chron 16:10,35; Ps 33:21; 103:1.



consecrated state:

The Church...manifests that this profession is a state consecrated to God, by the liturgical setting of that profession. The Church itself, by the authority given to it by God, accepts the vows of the newly professed. It begs aid and grace from God for them by its public prayer. It commends them to God, imparts a spiritual blessing on them and accompanies their self-offering by the Eucharistic Sacrifice (LG 45).

The rite of consecration introduces the person, object or place into the sphere of God, into the sphere of God's holiness. This ceremonial rite shows that persons, places or objects are not holy because of an innate quality in themselves. They are holy through involvement in the service of the holiness of God and his worship. The significance of sacrifice is underscored here especially because at the fullness of time, it pleased God to communicate himself to us most fully through the sacrificial offering of his beloved Son. Through baptism, every Christian is united to God and sanctified through the merits of that sacrifice (1 Cor 6:11; Eph 5:26). With regard to consecrated persons in the Church, their consecrated state acquires great significance because it is validated within the context of the celebration of the Eucharist, the memorial of Christ's atoning and redeeming sacrifice. The celebration of the memorial of that single sacrifice is the context that celebrates and inaugurates the consecration. Consecration to God within the context of the Eucharist opens another dimension of the meaning of consecration: the ethical dimension.

d. Although it is a single event, consecration or sanctification opens a process of ethical growth involving human effort.<sup>28</sup> A sharing in the holiness of God through consecration is evidenced in a change of behavior according to God's standards (1 Cor 6:9-11), even though it is said that the success of this process depends on God's grace, that is, God's prior act and continuing work in the believer (1 Thess 5:23). Therefore, in the Old Testament, the prophets emphasize not merely ceremonial purity but inward holiness. This development is equivalent to the idea of God's holiness as encompassing both God's separateness from the mundane and his moral perfection (Hab 1:13). As the context of the celebration of the consecration of the religious in the Church, the Eucharistic sacrifice gives a particular ethical orientation to this consecration. Similarity to Christ, as a sacrificial offering for the redemption of the world, becomes the measure of their special call to holiness. This item reflects the overall biblical concern for ethical and cultic purity befitting the unique relationship with God. This ethical dimension is underscored clearly in all the biblical paradigms of consecration presented above. God consecrates a thing, a place, an event or a person, intending, through this sacramental sign, to imbue his character on his people. Beyond the ethical dimension, however, God consecrates primarily for purposes that are found within his plan for salvation. No one is consecrated for himself or herself; rather, consecration is in view of God's salvific purpose in the world, as the paragraph below shows.

<sup>28</sup>Cf. Rom 6:19; 1 Thess 4:1-7; 2 Tim 2:21; Heb 12:14.



## 2.6 The Goal of Consecration

The goal of consecration includes two important things. Firstly, theology tells us that God is infinitely self-sufficient. He does not need anybody or anything in order to be or in order to be complete. However, the idea of consecration exposes the manner in which God desires the nearness of his creatures to himself. Exod 19:4 says this in relation to Israel:

**Exodus 19:4** You have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself.

The aim for which God liberated Israel is primarily for close relationship. This constitutes the primary motivation of consecration, closeness to God. Intimate relationship is also supposed in Jesus' relationship with the disciples whom he called to follow him. To remain or be with Jesus is foundational to mission (cf. John 1:35-39). Closeness to God opens the consecrated to the life of God and to the process of knowing and resembling God in his character. Therefore, the author of Ephesians says "... he chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world to be holy and blameless before him in love" (Eph 1:4). The phrase "to be holy" in this sentence cannot be separated from the antecedent sentence "he chose us in Christ". In this relationship, holiness means resemblance to God through close imitation of the life of Jesus Christ. It is a call to resemble Jesus Christ in his self-giving love.

The second goal of consecration is strongly bound up with the

first. Having been invited to share the life of God in Christ, the person is set free to serve the purpose of God in the world. An act of separation is necessary in order to dedicate or devote the person to God or to God's service. This is demonstrated in the call of many prophets. For instance, God took Isaiah from among a generation of unclean lips. In his vision of God in the Temple, the prophet was thereby purified and made ready for mission (Isa 6:1-13). Therefore, another way of expressing the goal of consecration is through the word 'mission'. Consecration always involves mission. This meaning is made very evident in the Gospel of John. Jesus Christ is consecrated and sent into the world (John 10:36). Similarly, in his high priestly prayer, Jesus prays to the Father to sanctify and consecrate the disciples and to send them as the Father has sent him (John 17:17-19).

While God's election already implies an act of separation, the person is further invited to 'separate' from persons, circumstances, things, attachments that present themselves as encumbrances to the services of God. Abraham abandoned his family and land and followed God's call. Among other things, the Nazirite was asked to separate from wine and strong drink (Lev 6:1-12), and Elisha separated from his family (1 Kings 19:19-21). Jesus made similar demands from his disciples. Peter and Andrew left their 'nets' and followed him; James and John left their 'boat and father' and followed him;<sup>29</sup> any would-be-disciple was asked to

<sup>29</sup>Matt 4:18-22; Mark 1:16-20; Luke 5:1-11.



leave home, relations and all possession (Matt 19:16-30). These New Testament witnesses show that God's act of separation invites further separation by which the person is totally free for service.

The meaning of consecration as a call to mission requires the extension of this research to another biblical concept, that of election. Like the idea of separation, election is another idea that is being discarded by contemporary writers as not adequate for explaining the meaning of religious life today. Some think it includes the sense of determinism. In spite of these hesitations, an explanation of consecration as a form of election highlights other shades of the meaning of the word that specify the nature of the goal of consecration as mission.

## **CHAPTER THREE**

### **CONSECRATION IN THE ECONOMY OF SALVATION**

**T**he idea of consecration is closely related to another more familiar idea, election. Similar to consecration, election refers to 'chosenness' or 'separation from', whose goal is service. In the entire Bible, God's dealing with humanity rests on the idea of election. God does not speak to or relate directly with everybody or a whole group. Rather, he relates with or speaks to the entire group through chosen intermediaries, who also represent the group. In the biblical presentation of the phases of God's relationship to the world, one remembers several intermediaries like:

- Adam represents Humanity: in the relationship between God and creation in relation to the care of the earth.
- Abraham represents Israel: in the relationship between God and the world in relation to blessing.
- Abraham represents Israel: in the relationship between God and Israel in relation to sonship in the family of God's people.
- Moses represents Israel: in the relationship between God and Israel in relation to prophecy and the law.



- Joshua represents Israel: in the relationship between God and Israel in relation to the land of promise.
- David represents Israel: in the relationship between God and Israel in relation to leadership of God's people.
- Levi represents Israel: in the relationship between God and Israel in relation to priesthood.

The list can still be broadened to include many others. All these intermediaries were chosen for special services in which they ensured the vitality of God's relation to the world and to his people, and they accomplished tasks that were beneficial to the group which they represented. Separation or election for service brings both ideas of consecration and election to close proximity. Therefore, to say that we are called to be holy or that we are elected is a simple affirmation that God has also chosen us, separated us from the rest of humanity, not in opposition to the world but to its service. The person called is dedicated exclusively to God for the benefit of the world. The elected serves as an intermediary between God and the people of God.

How should we describe the religious as an intermediary? Is it in relation to what? The nature of their intermediation is described in relation to two things. It is defined, firstly, in relation to God's life, and secondly, in relation to the word of God as a history-creating agent. In order to explain these

relations, I would like to appeal to four biblical figures: Abraham, David, the prophet and Jesus Christ, who were intermediaries *par excellence*. Speaking about these four figures would help to accomplish two tasks. Firstly, they would help me take the reader to a trip around the entire Bible, showing how intermediation is accomplished from different biblical perspectives. The example of the lives of these figures also demonstrates the different aspects of God's holiness to which the religious are called to witness in our contemporary world. Secondly, these biblical figures serve as biblical models for mission, that is, what the attitude of the religious should be to the word of God and to God's project in the world. The following paragraphs show how their intermediation could give a fresh articulation of that of a contemporary religious in the Church.

### **3.1 Called to Faith: Abraham as Model**

Abraham was chosen to demonstrate faith in the word of God. That word is a word of promise. Within the context of universal sinfulness, Abraham was to represent authentic witness to an acceptable human relationship with God, a relationship nurtured and sustained by 'faith'. In the Abraham stories, his faith is not a simple obedience to the command of the Lord as we read from Gen 12:4 "And Abraham went as the Lord commanded him". The story may look very simplistic or one-dimensional when we settle so quickly with the two ends of the stories without wasting some thought on the historical process that the stories underwent. Abraham's journey with God is not revealed in all its details when we are content with the knowledge that God promised him a son and he gave it to



him, and he promised him a land and fulfilled the promise for his descendants. A broader exposition of the details of these stories is necessary for a better comprehension of the nature of Abraham's faith. For this, it is important, first of all, to understand the character of the God who is in relationship with Abraham and the mission Abraham was called to accomplish.

The God of Abraham is a God of attractive promises, but he is also one who is mysterious and elusive and who demands absolute trust even in his ambiguity. God revealing himself as mystery, elusive and inexplicable to Abraham, the entire story of Abraham appeared as a story of testing. There is a way in which one could understand the entire story of Abraham and what God intended to demonstrate in his life. Abraham was asked to step into the unknown, into a mysterious sphere that is comprehensible only to God. His readiness and willingness to relate with this God who is mystery and whose revelation is shrouded in mystery earned him the title of 'our Father in faith'. He was asked to leave his native country and to go to an unknown land, where he would live like a foreigner (Gen 12:1). The author of this story makes the reader to suppose that Abraham knew neither the name of the land nor the way to reach it. The implication is that from this time onwards, Abraham was to depend totally on God's guidance. He also had to contend with the dangers and discomfort of living like a foreigner in another land. This was exactly what Abraham did (Gen 12:4).

Secondly, Abraham considered his childlessness and saw no

way into the future. He asked for an heir and God promised to give him a son from his old and barren wife, Sarah (Gen 17:15-16). This promise sounded funny to Abraham, seeing that he was very old and his wife was barren. This promise of a son was based on a logical impossibility. In fact, it was so ludicrous that the idea of it made Sarah laugh (Gen 18:9-12). Abraham could not understand how God would make this happen; yet he believed the Lord (Gen 15:6).

Thirdly, God promised to give him and his descendants a land already inhabited by nations more powerful than Israel (Gen 15:18-21). For this particular promise, God swore a covenantal oath in order to elicit faith in Abraham and to cast his doubts away (Gen 15:7-21). The covenant implies **the guarantee that the reality of God stands behind the promise and will execute its fulfillment**. After the promise of the son was fulfilled about thirty years after it was given, the story of Abraham began to climb towards a climax (Gen 22). God subjected Abraham to another test. This time, he was asked to offer Isaac as a burnt offering, a child who was the guarantee of all the promises God had made to him so far. The demand for Isaac's death appeared as God's attempt to destroy his own promises, which were all bound up with Isaac. The story represents faith's most extreme experience where God appeared as the enemy of his own word; yet Abraham went to do as the Lord had instructed him.

The faith of Abraham is demanded of all who are in a special relationship with God. To be consecrated is to be allowed to step into the unknown, to live within the sphere of the



mystery. It is to live within a sphere in which meaning sometimes eludes us and only blindness envelops us. Abraham's story runs parallel to that of Okechukwu, a man who went on a dangerous expedition. He intended to be the first to climb the highest but very rough mountain which was dreaded by all mountain climbers in the country, his intention being to become famous in his time. Okechukwu took all he needed for the expedition, even extra protective equipments in case of accident. His mission started well and just around mid afternoon on the second day, as he was just a little distance from the peak of the mountain, he stepped on an unsteady slippery surface and slipped. He started falling; he fell off the mountain surface and was heading straight into the deep valley that separated the mountain from the surrounding hills. Between cries of help, he caught hold of a branch and heaved a deep sigh of relief. However, this respite did not last long because the branch, the only thing that supported his life, began to crack. Another solution was needed. Okechukwu thought of letting go in order to drop to the ground but he saw that the way to the ground was still far. Because of the thick darkness that enveloped the way, he knew neither the distance the ground was from him nor how the surface looked like. How far was he from the surface? Was the surface smooth or rough? Would he hit his head on something? He thought of snakes and other dangerous animals. Another solution came to his mind. He cried out for help. Heeelp! Heeeelp! Is there anybody out there? He shouted several times, and as much as he shouted he could hear only the echo of his own voice. Meanwhile the branch kept cracking, and as he was about to give up, he heard a voice, "Okechukwu, I am here, I want to

help you". "Thank God", Okechukwu said, "Who are you? Please help me to come down" The voice replied, "I am God, I have come to help you, let go of your hand". Okechukwu considered the offer. He looked down again and saw the threatening dark valley, and as he did, the branch cracked more forcefully, this time intending to break off from the mother tree. Okechukwu thought in his mind what kind of God would ask him to drop into the threatening and unknown deep. At this thought, he raised his voice once more and shouted the louder "Is anyone else out there? Heeeeeeelp!

Okechukwu is an example of the contemporary person who cannot dare to step into the unknown. The person of today is at home with answers that are reasonable, tangible, logical and coherent. Any solutions less concrete and obscure frighten and make him/her uneasy. The story of Abraham, instead, represents a story of faith. Faith depicts a relationship to God that is required of every human being. The Abraham story shows that faith is worth the name especially when it charts an unknown, insensible, illogical and unsure way to God. Every consecrated person is called to this faith. Faith builds on life experience. There is no faith without life experience. From the time we become conscious of our Christian state of life, each of us is invited through the events of our life to grow in our faith in God. There are experiences in life that give us joy and they lift our hearts to the praise of God. There are also other events of life that open us to doubt, fear, worry, anxiety, vulnerability and lack of meaning. These experiences are not negative in themselves because they are the very experiences that open our minds to the mystery of God. They lead us to the



sphere where only God's glory and his will dictate our responses; responses that accord with God's will. They should create in us the attitude of reverence and total submission to God's will.

In fact, a relationship with God that is not based on this faith is not possible. Like Abraham, the religious is called to a project where the guarantee for the future or for security is based on no tangible reality (wealth, power or status), except on the word of God. The story of Abraham helps us to understand better the words of Heb 11:1: "faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen." Our generation would find it difficult putting confidence in a future promise that has no practical or present grounding for its fulfillment. This is the witness that the religious is called to bear to our generation: a person of faith, who clings to God, trustingly, obediently, and persevering in God's service even when he/she does not understand God's ways, and even when God's promises seem a logical impossibility. It is the acceptable human relationship to God capable of gaining from God immeasurable blessings, not only for the person of faith but also the whole universe (Gen 12:3; 18:17). Faith is a call to which only a few could respond. It makes us itinerant, inviting us outside of our 'native land' like Abraham, to embrace the mysterious, unfamiliar and unknown land where we are to proclaim the presence of God and his liberating grace.

### *3.2 Bearers of The Word of the Lord: Moses' Prophetic Model*

During a class with some of my students on 'Prophecy in Israel', I asked them if they think we have prophets in our day like in the days of Israel. Their minds went to priests, like Fr Ejike Mbaka and Fr Stephen Njoku, who are committed to healing ministry in the Church and some other priests, like Fr John Odey, who is committed to the critique of political leaders and of the society. Their answers reveal a conventional understanding that a prophet is anybody who could courageously criticize the government, work miracles and heal the sick through prayer and the laying of hands. For some reasons, many people in the Church desire to become prophets. Some abandon their jobs or assignments in the Church in order to begin a 'prophetic ministry' to which they think they have the charism to exercise. For some of them, prophetic ministry consists in ecstatic frenzy and practices that look like magic, visions, divination and sorcery, practices which the Bible condemns (Deut 13:1-5; 18:10-14). This is because of the erroneous belief that visions and miracles belong to the essence of prophecy. The association of prophecy to miracle and to healing belongs to a secondary level because the prophet is, first and foremost, a person of the word of God, who has direct access to the mind of God. The truth is that Christians desire to become what they already are by virtue of their baptism. Our insertion into Christ makes us priests, prophets and kings (LG 10, 12).

It is important to look more deeply into the nature of prophecy in order to understand the nature of our Christian calling to the



prophetic ministry. By their calling as people consecrated to God, the religious are prophets in a preeminent way. I have decided to give special attention to this topic because of the emphasis of Vatican II that the state which is constituted by the profession of the evangelical counsels belong, not to the hierarchical structure, but essentially to the charismatic nature of the Church (LG 44). The religious have an important role to play in the life and holiness of the Church. This role is defined in prophetic terms. The model of Moses show how the religious is related to God's word and to human history.

The Bible defines the prophetic ministry in strict relation to the word of God and to worship. The emphasis on the word of God is especially because God's word is an agent of the revelation of God's will and as that which shaped the life and history of Israel.<sup>30</sup> The word of the Lord is that which moves the world towards the objectives of God's will. Even today, the word of God should shape the history of our countries and the history of our institutions and families. The idea of the power of the word is a thread that runs through the entire Bible, but it is given the highest emphasis in the prophetic tradition.<sup>31</sup> The prophet stands as an intermediary between the spoken word of God and its actualization in human history. For the word of God to become a reality in human history, God needs the services of an intermediary.

<sup>30</sup>W. Eichrodt, *Theology of the Old Testament* 2, London: SCM, 1967, p72-73.

<sup>31</sup>Cf. Eichrodt, *Theology of the Old Testament*, p72-76.

The idea of human agency as a means of communicating the word of God is presented for the first time in Deut 5 as fruit of the people's request to God. The texts of Deut 5:22-33; 18:9-22 establish that prophecy is the sole means of communication with God, with the exclusion of other means angels, dreams, vision, divination, and sorcery. It also ensures the continuous operation of God's word in Israel by the promise of an unbroken line of prophets, whose mediation is comparable to that of Moses.<sup>32</sup> The text of Amos 3:7 presents the prophet as the privileged human agent to whom God communicates his intentions for the world. For this particular role, Moses is the archetype of intermediation; the man with whom God spoke face-to-face as a man speaks to his friend.<sup>33</sup> In the biblical tradition, human agency appears for the first time in the Mosaic tradition as a new theological dynamic. This dynamic belongs primarily to prophecy, where the prophet is the powerful and active agent through whom God's word creates history and historical change.

The idea of human agency depends on the relational character of the word. Although God's word shapes the cosmic and human history, it does not do so deterministically, but in a relationship with human response. 'Word' is not an abstract concept or a bare statement. It is a verbal and relational term that generates a

<sup>32</sup>J. Blenkinsopp, *A History of Prophecy in Israel*, Philadelphia: Westminster, 1983, p63.

<sup>33</sup>Cf. Num 12:6-8; Deut 34:10.



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relationship in which one communicates and another receives or responds. When used of God, it refers to a medium of divine communication, although this can only be said metaphorically of God with all the differences and similarities in mind with respect to the human analogue. With the use of this concept, Israel testifies that Yahweh is a God who speaks and is always in communication with humans. It is a vehicle for the will of God. Biblical texts present us with images of the word of God as a relational category, and they express the eagerness with which God desires this communication with his people.<sup>34</sup> God can speak and can be spoken to. From the 'beginning', the entire creation is called to respond to God's creative word: vegetation, living creatures, beasts and human beings.<sup>35</sup> The word of God, therefore, is a relational category by means of which the relationship between God and people could be realized more fully.

Like every human relationship, this relational characteristic exposes the word to vulnerability. If God has considered the human being as an interlocutor, it implies that the human partner can hear and respond to the word of God, without his/her freedom being compromised. In other words, God's word is not deterministic in the relationship. The creature could respond positively or negatively to God,<sup>36</sup> and any response can affect the relationship. Individuals can shape or

<sup>34</sup>Gen 18:7; Isa 65:1-2; Amos 3:7.

<sup>35</sup>Gen 1:1,11,22,24,28.

<sup>36</sup>Ezek 2:7.

reshape their history depending on how they respond to God's word.<sup>37</sup> The relational character of the word also implies that God has ongoing relationship with his word. Depending on the response from the human partner, God might change his mind or repent of the word he had earlier spoken. A surface level reading of an Old Testament passage like Isa 55:10-11 could suggest that God's words once spoken would move to fulfilment irrespective of human response or human resistance.

For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and do not return there until they have watered the earth, making it bring forth and sprout, giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater, so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and succeed in the thing for which I sent it.

However, a more contextual reading has shown that it represents God's word of promise on which the faithful rely and which remains in force even in the face of rejection. On the other hand, Exod 32 shows how those who receive the word can misuse it, twisting it toward ends not consonant with God's purposes, and preventing it from having its intended effect. In other situations, God may reverse a word of judgment in the face of

<sup>37</sup>The word of God in creation and promise constitutes an exception to this relational understanding. In the perspective of creation, God's word is powerful and effective in the beginning and in the natural and historical realms. What God says or commands comes to being (Gen 1; Ps 33:6,9; 107:20; Wis 16:12). The tradition also shows that God's doing also has creative effect (Isa 45:12; 48:13). Whether by word or deed, the creative word is a deliberate act of the divine will, which alters chaos decisively. Similarly, God's word of promise is reliable, irrevocable and permanent. While it will be fulfilled for the faithful, a rebellious generation may not live to see its fulfillment.



human repentance (Jer 26:3,13) or prayer (Jonah 3:10) or intercession (Amos 7:3-6). The fundamental motivation for a divine reversal of a word of judgement is that God desires that human beings live and not die. He always wants that his salvific intention be fulfilled in the world.<sup>38</sup> God can also stop the effects of judgment already administered so that they do not proceed to total destruction (Jer 42:10; Joel 2:13-14). In this way, human history is shaped not only by the word of God but also by human response to that word.

In view of the fact that the word may or may not reach its desired effect depending on the nature of human response, God takes yet another decisive step to ensure the efficacy of the word. In-between the word of God and human response, another dimension to this discussion appears in the biblical story in the form of a theological dynamic. This dimension regards the introduction of the human agent, whom God calls to embody the word and who sees to it that the word reaches its desired goal. It highlights the power of intermediation in the economy of salvation.

In the Bible, it is a dominant theological dynamic that is developed especially in the prophets. God can speak directly and on the basis of his authority as God, his word can have creative and redemptive effects on nature and in history. God spoke directly to the patriarchs (Gen 12Exod 2). However, for the first time in Israel's history, God's relationship with Moses

<sup>38</sup>Ezek 12:25,28; 24:14; Jer 4:28.

introduces a new pattern of relationship. This marks a new beginning in the history of Israel, distinct from what preceded in the time of the patriarchs. God begins to speak through the agency of human beings whom God calls for that purpose. This theological dynamic became a powerful means of eliciting human positive response to God's word.

The background to the story of Moses as an intermediary per excellence is found in the book of Exodus through Deuteronomy. Moses is presented in the entire story as the archetypical agent of God's will, one who has a unique access to the mind of God.<sup>39</sup> It would be appropriate, at this point, to use a text, Deut 34:10-12, to show how Moses fulfilled this function. This text closes the Pentateuch, the part of the Old Testament in which Moses is the authority behind the traditions that are represented. It is most fitting therefore that the Pentateuch should close with a statement that confirms the importance of this figure in the history of Israel. The issue is the statement about Moses' unequalled status in Israel:

**Deuteronomy 34:10-12** Never since has there arisen a prophet in Israel like Moses, whom the LORD knew face to face. He was unequalled for all the signs and wonders that the LORD sent him to perform in the land of Egypt, against Pharaoh and all his servants and his entire land, and for all the mighty deeds and all the terrifying displays of power that Moses performed in the sight of all Israel.

<sup>39</sup>R.W.L. Moberly, *The Old Testament of the Old Testament: Patriarchal Narratives and Mosaic Yahwism, Overtures to Biblical Theology*, Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992, p15.



This statement is "an all-inclusive retrospective evaluation of the period from the death of Moses to the time of writing".<sup>40</sup> It affirms that since the death of Moses, there has never been any prophet like him. In this way, the statement places the entire history of prophecy on a level lower than the Mosaic covenant. This statement is augmented with a reference to the signs and wonders which Moses worked in Egypt and in the midst of all Israel (vv11-12). Scholars consider these last verses as a gloss and as peripheral to the core issue of the text, which is the nature of the revelation to Moses.<sup>41</sup> The nucleus of the text is the direct face-to-face communication to Moses, which affirms the difference between Moses and the well-known modes of communication familiar to subsequent prophets. The face-to-face communication of Deut 34:10 is rendered analogically in another text (Num 12:6-8) as a mouth-to-mouth communication. In its context, the text serves to contrast the revelation proper to Moses with that of the prophets (through visions, dreams and riddles). Since the sight of the face of God was deemed fatal, this role was granted to him probably on the grounds that he was a covenant mediator. Tradition contemplated such nearness to God only within the covenant relationship (cf. Exod 24:11).

It is important to investigate the meaning of this face-to-face communication which explains the essence of the prophetic function of Moses. Exod 33:11 describes it as an unstinting

<sup>40</sup>J. Blenkinsopp, *Prophecy and Canon: A Contribution to the Study of Jewish Origins*, Indiana: Notre Dame, 1977, p86.

<sup>41</sup>Blenkinsopp, *Prophecy and Canon*, p87-89.

familiarity existing between friends. In other words, it describes an unmediated, deep, personal and intimate relation between God and Moses to the extent that Moses had knowledge of God's nature and character. According to Exod 33:12-23, Moses was such a powerful intercessor because God revealed his ways and glory to him. This is a privilege granted to no other mortal. On the strength of this intimacy, the people saw God in Moses. The word from his mouth was the word of the Lord. Above all, he was the only prophet who changed God's mind in favour of the Israelites (Exod 32:14). His power of intercession was unequalled in the history of prophecy (cf. Exod 32; v4 especially), and on the basis of Moses' intimacy with God, God manifested his saving deeds for his people through him.

Moses wielded a lot of impact on the entire religion of Yahweh and on prophecy in particular. In fact, prophecy in Israel changed both in its manifestation and in its character. After his death, a process began which changed the religion of the Patriarchs to the Mosaic religion that is called 'Yahwism'. The event of Josh 24 implies that the Mosaic religion, based chiefly on the idea of covenant with the people, became a unifying factor for the nation in a manner better than genealogy had done. After him also, prophecy acquired a Mosaic character. The nature of his prophetic ministry became the norm of authenticity for prophecy. In the entire biblical tradition, the only person who surpassed Moses both in representing the will of God and in the power of intercession is Jesus Christ, and this is thanks to the fact that he is God. "No one knows the Father except the One who has



come down from heaven and who has made him known" (John 6:46). The figure of Moses inspires a reflection on the meaning of Jesus as the Word of the Father, made flesh and dwelling among us. Jesus' intimacy with the Father was so strong that his words and works were identical with that of the Father (John 3:34; 5:17-21). On the basis of this relationship, the Father did whatever the Son asked him on behalf of the people.

Moses also inspires a reflection on the prophetic role to which the religious are called to play in our time. Our contemporary history could be described as the outcome of negative responses to God's word. Our generation is in great need of prophets like Moses. There are many 'prophets' in our day who work miracles and see vision, but whose ministry have no significant impact in the lives of individuals and of the nation. This is because their ministry lacks its essential foothold. By making Moses the greatest of the prophets, the biblical tradition affirms that closeness and intimacy with God is not only the foundation of the prophetic ministry but is also the ground for success in the prophetic ministry. An intimate relationship with God opens the prophet to the knowledge and ways of God that is granted only to a few. With such knowledge, the prophet can interpret the word of God in Scripture and in the daily events of life. The prophet would know how to touch the depth of God's heart for mercy on behalf of the people. The rise and fall of the entire history of Israel depended on Israel's adherence to the word of God spoken through the prophet. The religious are called to play this role for our generation.

### *3.3 Agents of Historical Change: David as Model*

Another form of intermediation to which the religious are called today concerns a relationship with God's project for the world and God's promise to his people. This concerns the idea of leadership as liberation, which the Bible presents as a duty which God demanded of all human beings in relation to creation. Leadership is one of the burning issues of our generation. It is responsible for most of the woes and sufferings of people in the world. David represents this aspect of the divinehuman relationship. The human commission, as it is defined in Gen 1:28, is a divine injunction to rule, subdue and dominate the created earth. This injunction is further explained in Gen 2:15 as 'tilling and care-taking', exactly what a Gardner does to a garden. To rule and to dominate the world is to serve and take care of the earth in order to liberate it from unfavorable and annihilating conditions, and so to realize its purpose in the divine plan.

David was called to fulfill this role in relation to Israel. David's relationship with God, however, does not depend on the idea of 'testing' as is the case with Abraham, but on the idea of chosenness.<sup>42</sup> He was chosen unconditionally to rule over God's people, not because of his exemplary moral life and not because of any special talent that he possessed. David's function as an intermediary lies in his being an agent of historical change in the history of Israel. Before him, God's

<sup>42</sup>1 Sam 16:10-11; 2 Sam 7:18-20; Ps 89:3.



promise of land had been threatened by nations more powerful than Israel. With his reign, the promise was fulfilled and secured, so that Israel became a great nation. He was the instrument of God's power against the enemies of Israel. Before him, kings in and outside Israel ruled according to 'ways of the kings of the earth' as we read from the first book of Samuel:

**1 Samuel 8:10-18** So Samuel reported all the words of the LORD to the people who were asking him for a king. He said, "These will be the ways of the king who will reign over you: he will take your sons and appoint them to his chariots and to be his horsemen, and to run before his chariots; and he will appoint for himself commanders of thousands and commanders of fifties, and some to plow his ground and to reap his harvest, and to make his implements of war and the equipment of his chariots. He will take your daughters to be perfumers and cooks and bakers. He will take the best of your fields and vineyards and olive orchards and give them to his courtiers. He will take one-tenth of your grain and of your vineyards and give it to his officers and his courtiers. He will take your male and female slaves, and the best of your cattle and donkeys, and put them to his work. He will take one-tenth of your flocks, and you shall be his slaves. And in that day you will cry out because of your king, whom you have chosen for yourselves; but the LORD will not answer you in that day.

This text distinguishes human leadership from divine

leadership. Human leadership, as this text shows, is known for its selfish and insatiable accumulation of the resources meant for the people's wellbeing and progress. As this text shows, the king takes for himself or for his benefit what belongs to the people. The climax of this kind of leadership is the enslavement of the people (v17). The biblical tradition, on the other hand, shows that God loved and gave the Davidic leadership the grace of covenantal character because David ruled God's people according to the manner of divine leadership, which is characterized by 'justice and righteousness'.

Leadership as liberation is most characteristic of all divine virtues. It encompasses other divine virtues like love, mercy and compassion, justice, and forgiveness. God's primary activity on behalf of creation is a liberative act (Gen 1:12:4). A similar liberative act characterized his primary activity for Israel (Exod 36). In these two events of fundamental importance for Israel and for the world, God's acts of liberation created positive human history. In addition, from the biblical perspective, reconciliation, the restoring of person or parties to a relationship of friendship, is essentially God's work. In the history of Israel, David became the model of this manner of divine governance. For this, his kingship was graced as a covenant. Ps 72 is presented in the Psalter as the prayer of king David for his successors. In it, he asks God to confer his justice and righteousness to his successor (the king's son), so that through his reign the land could experience peace and prosperity, the cause of the poor and the needy is protected, the oppressed are liberated, victory over the



enemies of the people is assured, and the glory of God is felt in the land. For this reason, God loved David and made him an unconditional promise to make his kingdom a dynasty (2 Sam 7; Ps 89). This made him a paradigm of the faithful Israelite.

The story of David demonstrates the importance of human agency and collaboration in the realization of God's promise. Having been anointed king over God's people, David employed the resources at his disposal (political strategies, military prowess, compassion) to ensure that the divine promises to Abraham became a historical reality. Under him, all the descendants of Abraham, who were previously separated peoples, became one people under one leadership (2 Sam 5). Under him, the Promised Land came to the possession of Israel; Israel had a capital city, and became independent of foreign rule and of sporadic incursions of enemies. Under him, the Philistines, who were a great threat to the Israelites, were subdued (2 Sam 5:17-25; 8:1). Tradition made him patron of organized worship and cult (1 Chron 23:29). Under him, God's promise of a people, a great nation, and blessing was realized (Gen 12:2-3). 2 Chron 18:14 summarizes the account of his reign in these words: "So David reigned over all Israel; and he administered justice and equity to all his people."

The model of David is important in our day, and there are ways in which it concerns communities of consecrated persons in the Church. Firstly, Religious life places consecrated persons at the heart of God's life, particularly at the heart of the ministry of Jesus, which Luke 4:14-21

describes as the Goodnews of liberation. The responsibility of the religious to participate in the mission of Jesus is grounded on their call to follow Jesus Christ more closely. The Davidic model is offered here as an example of the particular vocation of the religious to bear witness to effective and liberative leadership that promotes God's kingdom in the Church and in the world. Leadership shapes human history. Liberative leadership creates positive history.

The second way in which the Davidic model concerns the religious is that the witness which the religious are called to bear must take a sacramental form. The witness demanded of the religious is, first and foremost, to create models of reconciled and liberating communities for the world. This sacramental witness is most urgent in the face of the political and socio-economic retardation of most African countries and the enslavement of millions of people in Africa by their own kin. The Church's power of witness before the world is greatly undermined because religious communities also suffer, like other institutions in the world, the negative effects of human models of leadership. The members of religious institutes suffer these effects in their physical, psychological, emotion and spiritual lives. The weight of our collective witness to God's kingdom on earth falls so much on leadership, which determines both the community and individual identity of the members. Liberation, reconciliation, justice and compassion are lived virtues, not ideologies to be proposed to others. Religious communities should become more and more places where these aspects of divine governance are lived, experienced and proclaimed to



all people of good will. They cooperate in recreating the earth and in freeing bonds by making it, first and foremost, a reality in their own lives.

Thirdly, a sacramental witness to the model of divine leadership is important in relation to the vow of obedience. The practice of obedience in the past led to some forms of absolutism and abuse of power, which does not represent divine governance. The observance of this vow hinges more on leadership than on compliance to the rules and to the instructions of the superior. To this regard, the words of *PC 14* might be relevant:

Superiors...should fulfill their office in a way responsive to God's will. They should exercise their authority out of a spirit of service to the brethren, expressing in this way the love with which God loves their subjects. They should govern these as sons of God, respecting their human dignity. In this way they make it easier for them to subordinate their wills.

The next section is a more detailed study of one of the implications of meaning of consecration. This dimension regards the importance of the cultic liturgical context in which consecration is defined and the significance of sacrifice as a consecrating act. The cultic context demands a reinterpretation of religious life according to language and terminology of the cult. This endeavor serves the purpose

the terminology. Among other things, the cultic language will highlight the different ways in which religious life promote the worship of God as a sacramental presence in the world. This is all the more necessary given the pervasive influence of secularization in the world of today.



## CHAPTER FOUR

### RELIGIOUS LIFE AND THE WORSHIP OF GOD

**I**n the Old Testament, the vocabulary of consecration is found predominantly in the Priestly writings of the Pentateuch, especially in Exodus, Leviticus and Numbers. In these books, the vocabulary appears in relation to two figures: the Priest and the Nazirite. In relation to the priest, the vocabulary is found clustered especially in Exodus 28-30. These chapters discuss the vestment of the priest, the ordination of the priest, and the anointing of the priest, the altar and the altar vessels. The text of Num 6 is replete with the vocabulary of consecration as it presents the person of the Nazirite, that is, a man or woman who makes a temporary vow to separate himself or herself to the Lord. This text discusses the diet, manner of presentation, and the rules of life that preserve the consecrated state of the Nazirite. Since the subject matter of these chapters is cultic service, it shows that the language of 'consecration' is obtainable within a cultic context.

In spite of the attempts of secularization to humanize and demystify all signs of the sacred, religious life continues to remain one of the bearers of the sacred in the contemporary world. Since the language of consecration is comprehensible within the context of liturgy, it obliges us to use liturgical



language to show how consecration defines religious life. The cult uses terminologies, such as 'sign', 'symbol' and 'sacrifice', to show how persons or things designate the sacred. In this sense, religious life represents the sign and symbol of transcendental realities. It is also defined as a sacrifice of life to God. The paragraphs below present these ideas.

#### 4.1 Religious Life as Sign

How is religious life a sign? A sign is something which stands for an absent reality. Its task is to refer the observer to something other than itself.<sup>43</sup> The sign serves no purpose if it is not visible and/or beclouded. This is where the significance of both the material and moral habit of the religious lies. According to PC 17, the religious habit, "an outward mark of consecration to God", should reflect the values and goal of religious life. The religious should be conspicuously present in the world as a sign pointing away from itself and towards non-earthly realities. In living a life that is totally oriented towards the Absolute, they become billboards or sign posts, or if we should use the language of Vatican II, they are the "splendid sign of the heavenly kingdom" (PC 1). In this way, the religious are a sign for people within and outside of the Church. Within the Church, they are a sign "which can and ought to attract all the members of the Church to an effective and prompt fulfillment of the duties of their Christian vocation...the religious state...manifests to all believers the presence of heavenly goods already possessed here below"

<sup>43</sup>J. Empereur, *Exploring the Sacred*, Washington D.C.: Pastoral Press, 1987, p35.

(LG 44). In addition, they are reminders to all people of different races, culture and religion that what is earthly and temporal cannot be the goal of human existence and of history; rather, they are pathways toward the attainment of the transcendental goal of life. Therefore, in our world, where the strongest drive for survival is production and profit, a group should exist for whom the greater and stronger drive in their lives is another dimension of human life, not oriented toward power and wealth but to the dimension of love and of grace. The religious in the world should be a prophetic sign of that dimension of life which God reveals as the meaning and hope of humanity. According to Boff, "the religious are valuable not so much for what they do for people as for what they are for people: signs of God and of the meaning consciously or unconsciously sought by everyone."<sup>44</sup>

There are ways in which religious life could become a counter sign to the world. The contemporary world could ask questions on the meaning of the vows and on the religious habit in situations where it is obvious that the religious do not bear witness to those transcendental realities promised by the Lord. Since secularization thrives on selfish and utilitarian principles, signs of evil and injustice abound in the world. Living in the world, the religious could be lured to participate in one way or the other in these unjust structures. This is why their lifestyle in this society must represent the holiness and love of God.

<sup>44</sup>Boff, *God's Witnesses*, p73.



#### 4.2 Religious Life as Symbol

How is religious life a symbol? The word 'symbol' comes from the Greek *symballein* which means 'to throw together' or 'to assemble'. The underlying idea is to bring together things which were originally discrete in order to unite them. So, symbolism presupposes the overcoming of a breach; it is an agent of unity or of convergence.<sup>45</sup> A symbol is the language of ultimate reality. It does not denote the known or what is already understood; rather, it uses what is known and tangible to communicate what is unknown, what is not easily perceptible and what cannot be easily grasped with the senses. This is why the symbol serves as mediator or agent of unity. Different from a sign, a symbol does not stand for something else; it is the way in which something exists in another. Therefore, something or somebody is a symbol when it shares in the life of another thing or another person. For instance, the human body is the primary symbol of the personality. The Church is the symbol of Christ. Jesus is the symbol of God. The symbol is not the same as the reality but it is a means to that reality.<sup>46</sup> In other words, the religious are symbols in as much as they live beyond themselves in making God and divine values present in the world. There are many ways in which religious life is a symbol of transcendental realities. The insights of J. Empereur on the meaning of symbol<sup>47</sup> are employed here to explicate this idea.

(1) A symbol is the sensible expression of a transcendent or

<sup>45</sup>Empereur, *Exploring the Sacred*, p33-34.

<sup>46</sup>Empereur, *Exploring the Sacred*, p34, 44.

<sup>47</sup>Empereur, *Exploring the Sacred*, p36-46.

absent reality. Religious consecration implies something much more than a mere setting apart or reservation for God. God does not need people who are simply reserved for him. He needs agents or intermediaries through whom he could make himself present and known to the world. Nevertheless, since he is transcendent, God can become present to us through representation. Those who or things which represent God should be understood for what they are; symbols and not the reality. The primary mission of the religious is to make God present to and in the world. If the religious could represent God in the world, it is only because, having been set apart, they have the opportunity to share more deeply in the life of God. Nevertheless, God is absolute transcendence. He is beyond any form of human representation in the world. Human beings can represent him only in a symbolic manner. In this regard, all human representations come into question, especially because a mistaken representation can hide God instead of revealing him. This would be a contradiction in terms. Since it is the very purpose of a symbol to raise consciousness and remove ambiguity, the life of the religious should be dominated by one image and one focus, that is, God. The demand for a life that is focused on God is underscored by PC 5 in the following words:

Faithful to their profession then, and leaving all things for the sake of Christ (cf. Mk 10:28), religious are to follow him (cf. Mt 19:21) as the one thing necessary (cf. Lk 10:42), listening to his words (cf. Lk 10:39) and solicitous for the things that are his (cf. 1 Cor 7:32).



For this reason, the condition for authentic representation of God in the world is spelt out by a second level of symbolic meaning.

(2) In order to authentically represent the Absolute, the religious should participate in the life of God. It is the very nature of symbol to share the life of the reality it represents. The primary reason for consecration is close relationship with God which aims at deeper knowledge of God and transformation through sharing in his life. According to Empereur,

The involvement of a person with the transcendent present in the symbol is necessarily a transforming experience...the initial commitment which enables one to encounter the transcendent in the symbolic act is only the beginning of the relationship of ever deepening commitment which gradually transforms the person. In this way, it directs our lives, determines our moral behavior, and brings out our spiritual possibilities.<sup>48</sup>

This experience and sharing in the life of God prepares the religious for mission. The primary necessity of knowing God and of sharing in his life is exemplified in the life of Israel. The exodus from Egypt marked Israel's first encounter with the reality of God. Before he defined the mission which they were to live out in the Promised Land, God led Israel through the desert where he gave them knowledge of himself within

<sup>48</sup>Empereur, *Exploring the Sacred*, p42-43.

the hard realities of the wilderness. There, Israel experienced God as a provident father, protector, companion, guide, but especially as a merciful and forgiving God. The knowledge of God thus acquired was to shape Israel to truly become the people of God and to bear witness to this identity among themselves and to the peoples among whom they lived. A participation in the life of God is implied in the injunction "You shall be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy."<sup>49</sup> Similarly, the symbolic project invites the religious to grow more deeply in the knowledge and experience of God in order that they might truly live the life of God in the world. The conditions for the acquisition of this essential prerequisite are spelt out in PC 6:

Drawing therefore upon the authentic sources of Christian spirituality, members of religious communities should resolutely cultivate both the spirit and practice of prayer. In the first place they should have recourse daily to the Holy Scriptures in order that, by reading and meditating on Holy Writ, they may learn "the surpassing worth of knowing Jesus Christ" (Phil 3:8). They should celebrate the sacred liturgy, especially the holy sacrifice of the Mass, with both lips and heart as the Church desires and so nourish their spiritual life from this richest of sources.

(3) As a symbol, religious life is the point of convergence

<sup>49</sup>Cf. Lev 19:2; 1 Pet 1:15-16.



between this world and the new creation. By its very nature, a symbol "reveals by involving the person in a subject-to-subject relationship with transcendence..."<sup>50</sup> As special witnesses to the life of God and values of the Kingdom of God, the religious help to lead God's people to experience the values of the kingdom in their own lives. They do not merely give information about God and about transcendental realities; rather, they involve God's people subjectively to experience the life and love of God in their own states in life. Therefore, through authentic witnessing to the values of the kingdom, the religious challenge the unjust and inhuman structures of the society, inviting people to make options for peace, solidarity and love. In the words of Empereur, "the symbol is born in and for an encounter...the symbol attempts to open up the cracks of human existence, to let the transcendent shine through the interstices of ordinary human existence."<sup>51</sup>

(4) A final dimension of the symbol is that it is operative within a community. This dimension is important for a comprehensive understanding of the symbolic nature of religious life and its effective operation in the world.

According to Empereur,

one must be integrated into a larger horizon or context of meaning than oneself, before the transcendent becomes available in symbolic disclosure. If symbols only operate within a certain matrix or context and that matrix is community,

<sup>50</sup>Empereur, *Exploring the Sacred*, p41.

<sup>51</sup>Empereur, *Exploring the Sacred*, p41.

then one can only experience what these symbols contain if one is part of that context. One must belong to a transcendent community before the community's symbols can engage one.<sup>52</sup>

What is being underscored here is the function of community in the transformative process which is necessary for the effective functioning of symbol. The community functions as parent in the sense that it gives each religious an identity, a charism and a unique character which represents an aspect of God's holiness. Subsequently, it nurtures this character in the religious through communal celebration of the Word of God in prayer. A religious community has the power to transform its individual members if it bears collective witness to the power of the Risen Christ; if the members are unconditionally committed to one another, live in understanding, mutual support and correction, and experience healing and liberation in the power of the Spirit. In this kind of community, the religious can experience conversion or transformation which is required for authentic symbolic representation of God in the world.

The foregoing paragraphs show that the religious are veritable symbols in the manner in which they share the life of God, represent God in the world and invite the people to a subjective experience with the divine. These aspects of symbolic meaning are lived out within a community which

<sup>52</sup>Empereur, *Exploring the Sacred*, p45-46.



God has called to faith and to conversion. This symbolic meaning of religious life leads to the discussion of the third liturgical language, which spells out the way in which the religious truly becomes what is consecrated to God.

### 4.3 Religious Life as a Sacrifice to God

How is Religious Life a sacrifice to God? Sacrifice is a vital aspect of Jewish and Christian religions. In the Jewish religion, it served as an expression of the worship of God, as well as national identity and loyalty. Israel's sacrificial system marked and maintained Israel's covenant relationship with God. Relationship or communion with God could be greatly severed without it. In this system, sacrifice acquired different levels of meaning. Firstly, the offering of sacrifice attracted Yahweh's attention and favor and invoked his presence for a particular ritual occasion. Secondly, it provided a way for preserving the holiness of the people in everyday life, and thirdly, sacrifice is a gift to God.<sup>53</sup> The Christian religion interpreted the death of Jesus and the Last Supper in very close connection with the Jewish sacrificial terms. This interpretation is given in line with the Jewish idea that vicarious surrender of life has sacrificial significance. In this sense, the death of Jesus fulfills the meaning of the entire Old Testament sacrifices and their atoning effect.<sup>54</sup> In fact, for most Christian authors, sacrificial imagery is a metaphor for the

<sup>53</sup>Cf. G.A. Anderson, "Sacrifice and Sacrificial Offerings (OT)" in D.N. Freedman et al. (eds.), *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, vol 5, New York: Doubleday, 1992, p877-881.

<sup>54</sup>H.J. Klauck, "Sacrifice and Sacrificial Offerings (NT)" in D.N. Freedman et al. (eds.), *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, vol 5, New York: Doubleday, 1992, p889-890.

Christian life. Since religious life is a sharing in the life of Jesus, their total self-gift to God is a vicarious surrender of life which has sacrificial significance. Such total self-gift is a sign of the holiness of the Church, and by God's grace, a means of attracting God's favor on his people.

This cultic language is assumed in Paul's admonition of the Roman Christians in Rom 12:1 "I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship." In this text, Paul uses cultic and sacrificial language to admonish the Christians on how they should live their new status as a life consistent with the truth of the Gospel.<sup>55</sup> The phrase 'present your bodies' (Greek: *Sōma*) refers to a person's corporeality. This refers to a person's concrete relationships within the world, that is, the manner in which the person experiences the world and relates to others. What this text says of Christians is meant in an eminent manner for those who live the consecrated state. Therefore, in order that the individual's daily living be consecration, it should be lived as something dedicated to the Lord, that is, "not conformed to this world" (Rom 12:2) but lived only according to the manner of God's life. Consequently, the term 'living sacrifice' breaks with the idea of bloody sacrifice but it transposes it into the everyday life of the individual. Therefore, the life of the Christian is described as 'holy'; that is, the person's daily life in the world as something totally committed and totally dedicated to God and to God's service

<sup>55</sup>Cf. J.D.G. Dunn, *Romans 916*. Word Biblical Commentary 38B, Texas: Word Books Publisher, 1988, p710.



in the world.

The entire Pauline statement in Rom 12:2 is important to our discussion especially with regard to what we had said earlier about how religious life should be lived in confrontation to secularization.

**Romans 12:2** Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God-- what is good and acceptable and perfect.

It would be important to note that the verb 'conformed' is a combination of two Greek terms: the preposition *sun* (with) and the verb *skāmatizesthai* (to form oneself), which has the sense of forming oneself after another<sup>56</sup> or changing one's form to assume the form of another. In Rom 12:2 what is warned against is not to abandon or to dissociate from this world/age but not to conform to its structures and character. By expressing the admonition in the passive tense ("...do not be conformed"), Paul refers to the powers or forces in the human society which molds the character and conduct of individuals and the powers which "this age" exercises. These are the powers of social groups, cultural norms, institutions and traditions, which the individual has the responsibility to accept or resist.<sup>57</sup> This age is described in the Pauline corpus as evil (Gal 1:4), incapable of understanding the wisdom of God

(1 Cor 2:6,8; 3:18-19), immoral (1 Cor 5:10), and blind before the light of the Gospel of Jesus Christ (2 Cor 4:4). From the viewpoint of the new creation ushered in by the event of Christ's death and resurrection, this age is further described as something transitory, without the character of permanence (1 Cor 7:31). The way to resist the attractions and powers of this age is through 'the renewal of the mind', a kind of mental revolution that places the mind on heavenly values. In order to achieve this, it is not enough for the religious not to conform to the structures and character of this age, they must conform to Jesus Christ. According to Vatican II, religious life as a close following of Jesus is lived through the evangelical counsels.

<sup>56</sup>Dunn, *Romans* 916, p712.

<sup>57</sup>Dunn, *Romans* 916, p712.



## **CHAPTER FIVE**

### **CONSECRATION AND THE EVANGELICAL COUNSELS**

**S**ince this entire study considers the idea of consecration as foundational to our understanding of religious life, a holistic consideration of the arguments of the preceding chapters is intended here to guide our appreciation of the significance of the evangelical counsels. This study will be more comprehensible to the reader if the meaning of the vows is exposed as implications of how consecrated life relates to the life of the Trinitarian God and to the Church. In order words, the three vows of chastity, poverty and obedience spell out the manner in which consecrated persons express their closeness to God the Father, to Jesus Christ through the Holy Spirit and to the Church. These relationships are exposed below as the different dimensions of consecrated life.

#### **5.1 Theological Dimension**

God is the primary source of consecration. Only God is holy, and for his purposes in the economy of salvation, he communicates his holiness to his creatures through an act of consecration. Consecration is the foundation of religious life. The first implication of this is that the consecrated person is chosen to belong totally to God and to make a total gift of self



for God's service. These ideas are implied in the terms 'consecration' and 'religious'.

Consecration relates to ideas like 'total dedication' to God, 'separation for God's service', 'election chosenness'. Similarly, the word 'Religious', taken from two Latin verbs 'religare (to bind together) and re-eligere (to choose again or to select again) implies the same sense of selection for total belonging to God. In the words of St Augustine, the consecrated person is *homo Dei nomine consecratus et Deo votus*,<sup>58</sup> that is, a person consecrated in the name of God and dedicated to God. What is holy is what is set apart from others and preserved or dedicated totally for God. When something is consecrated, it shares in God's own holiness so that it has the power to communicate the same holiness to others. Religious life finds its unity and focus in this theological dimension. From this center, the evangelical counsels derive their meaning and orientation.

The concrete way by which the religious bind themselves to God is through the evangelical vows of chastity, poverty and obedience. "By such a bond, a person is totally dedicated to God, loved beyond all things. In this way that person is ordained to the honor and service of God under a new and special title" (LG 44). PC 5 corroborates this when it says that the profession of the evangelical counsels constitutes a way of total dedication of life to God and to his service, and this implies a special consecration which is deeply rooted in that of baptism and expresses it more fully.

<sup>58</sup> Augustine, *De Civitate Dei*, 10, 6.

The sense of total belonging to God facilitates the freeing of the heart so that it may be more inflamed with love for God and for all people.<sup>59</sup> It also facilitates the practice of obedience and poverty. Obedience and poverty would be difficult without this primary sense of total gift of self to God. Since it implies that the religious is separated, set aside and dedicated totally to God, unreservedly and free from the anxieties associated with marital and worldly concerns, consecration gives the religious a different kind of concerns. The only worry of the consecrated person is how to please the Lord. This is the sense in which religious life involves a renunciation. The religious renounces the freedom to have a life project that is defined in relation to self. The project of life of the religious is God's project. According to Leonardo Boff, "... [the] religious take the God to whom they have been consecrated as the starting point and from it derive their self-understanding and their involvement in the world."<sup>60</sup>

It is mistake if the religious submits to the temptation of translating the special consecration as denial of the world or opposition to it or even assuming a superior or exalted position over others and over the world. Consecration to God does not place the religious against the world or against others. Rather, it places the religious in a position to be concerned deeply with God's mission in the world. The role the religious play as sacrament of God's holiness is the goal of

<sup>59</sup>Cf. PC 12.

<sup>60</sup> Boff, *God's Witness*, p156.



consecration.

Our world today defines the human person in terms of the person's relation to the world: economic, political and social. In order to explain the value of the individual, the contemporary society considers the person's specialization or capacity in productivity. The vows, as an expression of consecration, first of all define the religious in relation to God and to God's mission in the world. Secondly, it makes the religious available for the services of God's work in the world. These vows describe what we might call the sphere of existence of the religious. The sphere in which the religious live and operate is God. God also determines the nature of the role the religious play in the world. The religious exist and function in the world but they perform a sacred, cultic and sacramental role.

This theological dimension of religious life specifies the primary goal of consecration as close intimacy with God or a sharing in the life of God. The vows are sign, symbol and sacrament of God's own holiness. As a sign, the religious show, through the vows, that their lives are oriented towards God, and they demonstrate through a joyful living of the same vows that what is earthly cannot be the goal of human existence and of history. As symbols of the transcendent, consecrated persons have the primary duty to make God present to and in the world. This is possible through their life of holiness as spelt out in the vows. Holiness is the defining characteristic of one who God has consecrated and brought close to himself, and this would imply that the consecrated

person has acquired the properties of God's life. According to the definition of Vatican II, this sharing in the life of God has a specifically Christological / Pneumatological character.

## 5.2 Christological Dimension

The call to holiness of life is a call to live the life of God as revealed in the life of Jesus Christ, who is Son of God and perfect image of the Father. *PC* 1, § 3 underscores this when it says:

...all those called by God to the practice of the evangelical counsels and who, faithfully responding to the call, undertake to observe the same, bind themselves to the Lord in a special way, following Christ, who chaste and poor (Cf Mt 8:20; Lk 9:58) redeemed and sanctified men through obedience even to the death of the cross (cf Phil 2:8).

In Jesus Christ, God gave the fullest revelation of who he is and what he does for the world. The life of Jesus spells out how God redeemed mankind by bringing them out of death into life. The call to holiness is a call to become children of God by becoming bearers of life like Jesus through dying in order to give life to others. The Gospels, each in its own style and with its own structural and thematic features, depicted Jesus as the sacrament of God's righteousness, love and compassion for creation. In his miracles, forgiveness of sins and compassion for people, Jesus manifested the advent of the Kingdom of God. His words and actions manifested God's



decisive action against evil, by which He freed his children from all that held them captive, giving them the opportunity to enjoy the freedom of the children of God. In the language of Paul, Christ, through his obedience to the Father, reversed the process of disobedience and selfish living that began with Adam and which led all to death. Therefore, through his death and resurrection, Jesus offers a pattern of life-for-others that gained eternal life for all (cf. Rom 5:12-21).

In relation to institutes of consecrated life in the Church, the spirituality of every institute is the call to imitate an aspect of the life of Jesus which falls within the general pattern of Jesus' life-for-others way of living. For some institutes, the spirituality could be Divine Love in action; for others it could be selfless service to the poor. Every spirituality is an invitation to live like Jesus in a way specified by the Charism of the institute. The call to be like Jesus is not a call to put some moral virtues in practice, for instance, love, compassion or justice. It is rather a call to follow Jesus in living the life-for-others pattern of life. It is a call to become Jesus to the world. In Rom 8, Paul says that this is possible only if we are conformed to Christ.

According to Rom 8:29, we are called "to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn within a large family." The verb 'to be conformed' (*sunskāmatizesthai* - to form oneself) has the sense of forming oneself after

<sup>61</sup>Dunn, *Romans* 916, p712.

another<sup>61</sup> or changing one's form to assume the form of another. What Paul says here could be explained by reference to water which takes any kind of shape, depending on the container into which it is poured. It could also be explained with a building block which, when it was still a mixture of cement and sand, was formless until it is poured into the block mold that gives it the block shape or form. Similarly, every human being has a 'form'. The 'form' of a person that is meant here is not the physical form of the human being; it is the essential structure that defines the person's way of being. The form of Jesus Christ, in this sense, is the pattern of life that he lived. What is meant here follows the message of Rom 5:17-19 which says:

If, because of the one man's trespass, death exercised dominion through that one, much more surely will those who receive the abundance of grace and the free gift of righteousness exercise dominion in life through the one man, Jesus Christ. Therefore just as one man's trespass led to condemnation for all, so one man's act of righteousness leads to justification and life for all. For just as by the one man's disobedience the many were made sinners, so by the one man's obedience the many will be made righteous.

The way a person lives is the manner in which he/she exercises dominion over others, leading them to life or to death. The apex of this way of living is Jesus' love for us which led him to die on the cross. "God proves his love for us



in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us" (Rom 5:8). Through his life of total obedience to God which led him to die for us, Jesus offered an example of life that earned life for all and he invites his followers to live according to his pattern of life. "We know love by this, that he laid down his life for us and we ought to lay down our lives for one another" (1 John 3:16). The impact of Jesus' life on creation becomes very comprehensible within the context of the death and life struggle that characterize existence in the world. This way of living is proposed to every Christian as the way that leads to salvation.

In view of the message of Rom 8, the Christian should do away with the form of life according to the flesh or according to worldly standards and assume the form of Christ. To live according to the "flesh" is to make the human person and his interests the center, the point of departure and arrival of life. As in Rom 8:29, Paul uses the verb 'to conform' in Rom 12:2 in order to warn Christians against conforming to the structures and character of this world. Therefore, the injunction to conform to Christ describes the entire vocation and programme of the life of the Christian. The ultimate purpose of this programme is the redemption of creation (cf. Rom 8:19-23). This Christological dimension of religious life stresses further how religious life serves the economy of salvation. One must consider, at this point, the Pauline assertion that this conformation to Christ cannot be obtained through human effort. It is possible only through the Holy Spirit.

### 8.3 Pneumatological Dimension

The Holy Spirit is presented in the Acts of the Apostles as the presence of the risen Christ in the Christian community. Among the early Christians, the most important cohesive factor was their sense of living in the presence of the risen Lord through the Holy Spirit.<sup>62</sup> Through the Holy Spirit, the early Christians were able to withstand the distinctions of race, gender and religion and they preached a good news which was a logical extension of the openness and universality that characterized Jesus' ministry.<sup>63</sup> The apostles conquered fear, and got the courage to take the good news beyond the boundaries of Jerusalem only through the power of the Holy Spirit. Christ's presence was also experienced in the gifts of the Spirit for the edification of the members and for the building up of the Church (1 Cor 12:1-11). In sum, the presence of the Holy Spirit is the sign that God's power is at work in the Christian community. These instances in the life of the early Christians show that Christian life is not possible without the Holy Spirit.

The apostle Paul defines the work of the Holy Spirit in relation to the individual and to the Church. In relation to the individual, the Holy Spirit is the divine power that operates the miraculous transformation of the individual, integrating him/her into the saving event of the cross and resurrection and

<sup>62</sup>Cf. Acts 10:44-48; Rom 6:3; 8:16; 1 Cor 12:12-13; Gal 3:27-28.

<sup>63</sup>Cf. Matt 28:19-20; Acts 13:46; 15:22-35; Rom 1:16.



helping him/her to live in the sphere of the work of Christ. In Rom 8:15-17 and 1 Cor 12:12-13 this work of the Spirit leads to our adoption as children of God and incorporation into the body of Christ, the Church. Therefore, adoption or conformity with Christ is synonymous with 'to be in Christ' or 'to be in the Spirit'. Paul uses this language to emphasize that the Spirit is totally the gift of God.<sup>64</sup>

The foregoing highlights the importance of the Holy Spirit in the life of consecrated persons. If the goal of consecration is conformity with Christ, it means that the Holy Spirit is a power on which the religious must always rely and not on his/her own possibilities. In the language of Paul, to live by the Spirit is not to live according to the desires of the flesh or to have confidence in the flesh (Gal 3:3; Phil 3:3). The Pauline injunctions to Christians to rely totally on the power of God and to renounce the flesh (or the world or all those qualities or deeds of which someone might boast) makes clearer the meaning of the vows which the religious profess. Since the close imitation of Christ required of the religious is achieved through the evangelical counsels, total reliance on the Spirit is necessary for the ability to renounce the power and the security that comes from wealth and personal achievements, in order to allow oneself to be guided by the power of God. When one is able to live according to the pattern of Christ's life, the person could then say with Paul "I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me" (Gal 2:20).

<sup>64</sup>Cf. E. Schweizer, "Pneuma" in G. Friedrich (ed.), *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* VI, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1968, p427-428.

These Christological and Pneumatological dimensions of religious life open up to another dimension, the ecclesial. The holiness, which the religious are called to bear witness, is the vocation of the entire Church. "The more fervently, then, they [the religious] are joined to Christ by this total lifelong gift of themselves, the richer the life of the Church becomes and the more lively and successful its apostolate" (PC 1 § 3).

#### 5.4 Ecclesial Dimension

Consecrated life has an ecclesial dimension, which is underlined in its definition as "a special calling that belongs to the life and holiness of the Church" (LG 44). This definition affirms that religious life is a life lived in the Church and for the Church and her mission. Consecrated persons do not live a private life but they live for the Church. God's call to holiness is addressed primarily to the Church. The vocation of individuals to the consecrated life serves this ecclesial dimension in the plan of salvation. Just as Israel was chosen and called to a life of holiness, the same call is renewed to the Church redeemed by the blood of Jesus Christ. This ecclesial dimension underscores the importance of religious life in the Church. It means that the success of the Church's vocation to holiness depends to a large extent on those who have been called to live it out in an intensive manner.

The primary assignment of religious communities, therefore, is to bear practical witness to the Church's vocation to holiness. The practice of the vows must become a



sacramental witness against the threats and challenges of secularization, disunity, hatred and oppression among peoples. Through the vows, the religious give sacramental witness to God's holiness when religious communities become places where God's holiness (liberation, reconciliation, justice, compassion, ecc) are lived, experienced and proclaimed to all people of good will. They undertake this task by being, first and foremost, a reconciled and liberating community. God's holiness must become a reality in their personal lives, in their communities and in the world at large. Their identity as consecrated persons invites them to become ministers of liberation and of reconciliation (2 Cor 5:20-21).

The ecclesial dimension of religious life specifies the second goal of consecration, which is mission or the apostolic activity that springs from intimate union with God. The Latin expression *Sanctum diffusivum sui* means that holiness diffuses itself; it is not static; it is a dynamic reality. The Church is missionary both by virtue of the life which flows from Christ into her members (cf. Eph 4:16) and by virtue of her being founded by Christ as the sacrament of salvation to the world (cf. AG 5). Religious communities engage in apostolic mission in the name of the Church whose mission is an extension of the mission of Christ.

Christ was sent by the Father "to bring good news to the poor, to heal the contrite of heart" (LK 4:18), "to seek and to save what was lost" (LK 19:10). Similarly, the Church

encompasses with love all who are afflicted with human suffering and in the poor and afflicted sees the image of its poor and suffering Founder. It does all it can to relieve their need and in them it strives to serve Christ. (LG 8, §3).

In imitation of Christ, every Christian is called to become a missionary (cf. AG 15, §6), but only some are called to dedicate their entire lives to mission work. According to AG 18, §1:

[Religious life] not only offers precious and absolutely necessary assistance to missionary activity, but by a more inward consecration made to God in the Church, it also clearly manifests and signifies the inner nature of the Christian calling.

The total dedication of consecrated persons to God makes them available for the service of God. In other words, through sharing in the life of God, the religious begins to see and love the world with God's own vision and compassion. Vatican II affirms further that except for religious communities which are entirely dedicated to contemplation, "apostolic and charitable activity belongs to the very nature of the religious life, seeing that it is a holy service and a work characteristic of love, entrusted to them by the Church to be carried out in its name" (PC 7; 8, §2). Therefore, fidelity to the demands of consecration implies that every religious community "should join contemplation, by which they fix their minds and hearts



on him, with apostolic love, by which they strive to be associated with the work of redemption and to spread the kingdom of God" (PC 5, §5).

## CHAPTER SIX

### SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

At the end of this study, it is important to point out the strengths of this study and what it contributes to the question of the identity of the religious and to scholarship. I chose to entitle this book "Consecrated" because the term 'consecration' helps me to define who the religious are in relation to God and in relation to how they should live in the Church and in society. Vatican II makes consecration the foundation of religious life. The present study revolves exclusively around this foundational concept, intending to situate religious life exactly within the place where it belongs, that is, in the initiative and call of God. More than any other concept, consecration offers an understanding of religious life that helps to abate the challenges of secularization.

The term consecration refers to God as holy and to him as the author of consecration. It designates God's transcendence, moral character and the non-human manner in which God exhibits his saving actions for human beings and for the entire creation. It designates God as God and not as human. Other created things (persons, things, events, time and places) could become holy through their nearness to God or through their dedication to God and their separation for his service. For a



comprehensive presentation of the meaning of consecration in the Bible, we exposed other areas of meaning which further elucidate the thought-world from which the idea of consecration derives and within which the term is used. Therefore, some biblical paradigms of consecration (the Sabbath, the Temple and the Law and Israel) are presented in this study to show how God, in his plan of salvation, intends to claim all creation through closer relationship with its representative parts. The underlying meaning of consecration is that the nearer a person or a thing is to God the more powerful it is to draw its likes to God. Thus, the primary goal of consecration is close relationship with God or a sharing in the life of God. In a secondary manner, its objective is apostolic action or mission.

Consecration opens to mission. Mission embraces, not only the works that the religious do in and for the Church but more especially, a witness of life to the God whose life they share. Mission is exemplified in the life of some biblical figures (Abraham, Moses and David), whose relationships with God are presented in Chapter Three of this book as examples of the different aspects of God's holiness to which the religious are called to bear witness in our contemporary world. The life of Abraham helped us to define a very crucial witness which the religious should bear in our contemporary world. The contemporary African lives in fear and is in need of immediate answers to the problems of life; answers that are reasonable, tangible, logical and coherent. Any solution less concrete and obscure frightens and makes him/her uneasy. Like Abraham, faith invites the religious to be itinerant, to

embrace what is unfamiliar and mysterious, and to be open to a future whose guarantee is based solely on the word of God. Furthermore, the lives of Moses and David are cited here to indicate how the religious could become agents of historical change through their prophetic role and through their making God's word of promise become a concrete reality in the lives of the people. Both stories demonstrate the importance of human agency and collaboration in the realization of God's promise.

The concrete way by which the religious bind themselves to God is through the evangelical vows of chastity, poverty and obedience. In this book, the presentation of the meaning of religious life from the viewpoint of consecration gives a better and clearer appreciation of the evangelical counsels. It highlights the four dimensions of religious life: the theological dimension, which describes the primary goal of consecration as intimate relationship with God and a sharing in his life; the Christological and Pneumatological dimensions, which define this sharing in the life of God as a conformation to Christ through the Holy Spirit; and the ecclesial dimension, which describes how consecration disposes the religious for the service of God in the world, that is, to the missionary work of the Church. These dimensions stress further how through the evangelical counsels, the religious share in the life of Christ and serve the economy of salvation.

Hence,

- A. The problem of the identity of the religious is resolved once it is understood in the context of consecration.



- b. The religious life does not only belong to the traditional society of yesterday; it also has a place and plays a vital role in the world of today.
- c. By consecration, the religious does not claim superiority to or have aversion for the world; religious life is rather a presence in the world for the salvation of the same world.
- d. Veritable models of consecration are not lacking in the Bible. By drawing lessons from them and from some authentic traditions found in our culture, contemporary religious would discover clear understanding of their call, identity and mission.
- e. In the light of the proper understanding of consecration, the evangelical counsels can in no way be seen as or considered as burdens. Rather, through living them as participation in the life of Christ, the religious acquire their rightful meaning as agents of liberation and reconciliation.
- f. If the religious life is rightly understood using the insights offered herein, some of the tensions that arise at times between the religious and the clergy and other lay people would cease to be.
- g. The vocation to the consecrated life is a call to live and work in close intimacy with God for the liberation, reconciliation and salvation of the world.
- h. In all, religious consecration is more of what God does in and for the world through the Church than what human beings do.

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# Consecrated:

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A vision of Religious life from the  
viewpoint of the sacred

**T**he message of this book is addressed primarily to the Religious in the Church. However, it is published with the recognition that any attempt to clarify issues concerning religious life must be done not only in a setting reserved for the religious but also in a setting open to the entire people of God and to the society within which the religious live and work. Religious life is so important in and to the Church that its identity needs to be both comprehensible to all and defensible by the religious themselves. The book discusses consecration as foundational for the understanding of religious life. "The nearer a person or a thing is to God the more powerful it is to draw its likes to God". This is the meaning drawn from the term 'consecration', which guides the author's presentation of consecrated life as a sharing in the life of God and as an important means of serving the economy of salvation. Biblical models of consecration are presented in the book as examples to the religious of today, to help them to gain a clear understanding of their call, identity and mission.



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